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Ethnocentric Monoculturalism and Ernest Becker: An Existential-Psychoanalytic Explanation of Cultural Encapsulation

Abstract

The importance of culture in psychology is increasingly being acknowledged. Despite this, cultural competence has been slow to develop in the field (Hall, 2006). Sue (2001) has posited that psychologists themselves represent a major barrier to cultural competence because many are unconsciously trapped within their own Eurocentric worldview, a phenomenon that Sue refers to as ethnocentric monoculturalism. An unfortunate result of ethnocentric monoculturalism in psychology has been an overly narrow focus regarding not only the types of interventions implemented with culturally diverse clients but also the roles that a psychologist should fill (Sue, 2001; Hall, 1997). My purpose in this thesis is to explore the underlying causes and functions of cultural encapsulation represented by ethnocentric monoculturalism through the theory of cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker. Becker's existential-psychoanalytic theory of culture represents an untapped resource in multicultural clinical psychology for understanding the psychological functions and mechanisms of cultural encapsulation. According to Becker (1973), a fundamental motivating force in human behavior is the awareness of death. Becker believed that culture itself exists in part, as a means for coping with the fear of death. A major argument in this thesis is that one of the reasons that people cling so strongly to their personal belief systems and reject others is because people's belief systems are intimately tied to their own sense of mortality.

Degree Type

Thesis

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ETHNOCENTRIC MONOCULTURALISM AND ERNEST BECKER: AN
EXISTENTIAL-PSYCHOLANALYTIC EXPLANATION OF CULTURAL
ENCAPSULATION

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF
SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY
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BY
JOHN SNYDER
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REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
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April 18, 2008

APPROVED: _____
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Abstract

The importance of culture in psychology is increasingly being acknowledged. Despite this, cultural competence has been slow to develop in the field (Hall, 2006). Sue (2001) has posited that psychologists themselves represent a major barrier to cultural competence because many are unconsciously trapped within their own Eurocentric worldview, a phenomenon that Sue refers to as ethnocentric monoculturalism. An unfortunate result of ethnocentric monoculturalism in psychology has been an overly narrow focus regarding not only the types of interventions implemented with culturally diverse clients but also the roles that a psychologist should fill (Sue, 2001; Hall, 1997). My purpose in this thesis is to explore the underlying causes and functions of cultural encapsulation represented by ethnocentric monoculturalism through the theory of cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker. Becker's existential-psychoanalytic theory of culture represents an untapped resource in multicultural clinical psychology for understanding the psychological functions and mechanisms of cultural encapsulation. According to Becker (1973), a fundamental motivating force in human behavior is the awareness of death. Becker believed that culture itself exists in part, as a means for coping with the fear of death. A major argument in this thesis is that one of the reasons that people cling so strongly to their personal belief systems and reject others is because people's belief systems are intimately tied to their own sense of mortality.

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Introduction

In his theory on culture, cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker offers a compelling anthropological, existential explanation for the creation of culture and the function it serves. This thesis is a review of his theory on culture and an attempt to incorporate it into contemporary multicultural literature in clinical psychology. This thesis offers an explanation regarding the development of cultural worldviews and why these worldviews are so difficult to challenge. This understanding is important for clinical psychologists struggling to obtain cultural competence. Becker's work will be related to the contemporary concept of *ethnocentric monoculturalism*. Essentially, ethnocentric monoculturalism describes the phenomenon whereby one group's cultural worldview comes to be viewed as reality (Sue, 2004). Relying on Becker's work, this thesis takes the position that cultural worldviews are intractable to change and often violently defended because one's own sense of personal mortality is symbolically wrapped up in one's cultural worldview. Viewed from this position, alternative worldviews are implicitly and sometimes explicitly threatening on a mortal level because they threaten our shared cultural symbols (Becker, 1973). To reiterate, the benefit of this thesis will be found in an in-depth psychological explanation of culture and the cultural encapsulation (ethnocentric monoculturalism) that psychologists must battle against in themselves and within the sub-culture of psychology in order to obtain some level of cultural competence.

The importance of culture in psychology is increasingly being acknowledged. In the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Guidelines on multicultural education*,

training, research, practice, and organizational change for psychologists, the authors state that, “All individuals exist in social, political, historical, and economic contexts, and psychologists are increasingly called upon to understand the influence of these contexts on individuals’ behavior” (2003, p. 377). The APA defines culture as, “...the belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes” (2003, p.380). Further, culture is, “...the embodiment of a *worldview* through learned and transmitted beliefs, values, and practices, including religious and spiritual traditions” (APA, 2003, p.380, italics mine).

Psychologists are being encouraged to consider and to explore their own levels of cultural competence and there are several models of cultural competence that provide a means for psychologists to approach the issue. Munley and Johnson (2003) point out that multicultural counseling models have traditionally been based on a tripartite model focusing on three general areas (1) counselor awareness of personal cultural values and biases, (2) counselor awareness of client’s worldview, and (3) culturally appropriate interventions. More recently, Sue (2001) has presented his *Multidimensional Model of Cultural Competence (MDCC)*. This model also relies on three primary dimensions,

- (a) racial and culture specific attributes of competence, (b)
- components of cultural competence, and (c) foci of cultural
- competence. Based on a 3 (Awareness, Knowledge, and
- Skills) x 4 (Individual, Professional, Organizational, and
- Societal) x 5 (African American, Asian American,
- Latino/Hispanic American, Native American, and

European American) factorial combination. (Sue, 2001, p. 790)

Models such as the MDCC are invaluable in their practicality as far as offering an immediately graspable guide for psychologists. However, there is something lacking. That something is an all encompassing theory on the psychological origins and function of culture. “The traditional counseling professional awareness dimension of the tripartite mode of multicultural counseling competence does not seem to include attention to or emphasis on understanding the basic dynamics of cultural differences...” (Munley and Johnson, 2003, p.369). Such an understanding is essential because it takes the clinician beyond a mere definition of culture and makes possible an in depth consideration of the dynamics and power of culture.

An understanding of culture, what it is and *why* it exists, is of immense importance to clinical psychologists. A model of multicultural psychology that does not provide an explanation for the origins and function of culture is analogous to teaching a student how to do long division with a calculator without really explaining what it means to divide. Without this foundational knowledge and understanding students are simply pushing buttons on a plastic machine. They have no idea what these numbers actually mean or where they came from. They only know to divide when someone tells them to divide. They are unable to think for themselves and only know the correct order to punch in the symbols that stand for “ten” and “five” and “divide” and “equals”. When they are finished they are left with the symbol for “two” but have no real idea what it all means or what *division* is or why they even divided in the first place.

Guidelines that admonish us with the familiar phrases “take cultural considerations into account”, “acknowledge our own biases and preconceived notions”, “realize that all individuals exist within a cultural framework” and “consult the literature” do the same thing; they only teach us to use the cultural calculator. Sue’s MDCC provides psychologists with some structure and he does attempt to explain why it may be difficult to challenge our own beliefs, but he does not go far enough. We are left with only a vague sense of our own fearfulness. It is not that these admonishings are unimportant. Instead, they are inadequate because they provide us with no deep understanding of what culture is and why culture is so important other than to say that it matters to people, and if we ignore it we might make mistakes. We are given no theory or ground upon which to stand.

Becker’s work seems to provide essential foundational knowledge for multicultural counseling in terms of offering a framework for understanding the basic dynamics concerning why cultural and multicultural differences are so difficult and challenging to transcend (Munley and Johnson, 2003, p. 368).

What exactly is culture? Why is it so important? Dictionary definitions seem hopelessly inadequate for truly understanding this thing called culture. It is as if no one has stopped to wonder and to marvel at the fact that culture is ubiquitous. It is absolutely everywhere that humans are, a true universal. The importance of culture goes far beyond merely being a piece to include in our consideration of a client.

An in-depth grounding in what culture ultimately means to humans and why it is universal is a necessary first step in the never ending pursuit of cultural competence. This thesis seeks to provide that ground. In reality the basis for that knowledge or ground is already there and has been there in one way or another for thousands of years. As Becker (1973) pointed out, *it* has simply been buried underneath mountains of fact, data, and scientific findings. This thesis amounts not to a revelation of anything new, but instead to a rediscovery of what has always been there. That rediscovery is quite simply our awareness of death. In Western philosophy and psychology this is often referred to as an existential dilemma and I will be discussing culture from this existential perspective and using the language of existentialism. Other people and cultures may call it something else and talk about it in a different way. The name and language is not important. What is beyond argument is that in every culture, humans know they will die. The way people solve or deal with the problem of death provides much of the basis for culture. In fact, Becker argued that the knowledge of death is one of the main reasons that culture or society exists, if not the reason. “Every society is a hero system which promises victory over evil and death” (Becker, 1975, p.124). Just what is meant by the term “hero system” will be revealed later in this thesis. For now, the main point is that Becker viewed culture as a means for dealing with death.

Acknowledgements

A few preemptive acknowledgments and explanations are necessary before proceeding. First of all, Becker was a cultural anthropologist and not a psychologist. However, his theory is based on psychoanalysis and existentialism. The pariah psychoanalyst Otto Rank is omnipresent in Becker’s thought as is Sigmund Freud and

Erich Fromm. As far as multicultural psychology is concerned, the inclusion of work from a cultural anthropologist seems justified and even essential (Sue, 2000; Levin & Browner, 2005; Varenne, 2003). As Sue points out, psychology needs to reevaluate its definition of psychology and consider the inclusion of different roles or disciplines within the field of psychology (2000). This notion is also implicit in the APA multicultural guidelines, as they admonish psychologists to “broaden the purview of psychology as a profession” (2003, p.377).

Second, while this thesis is not about history or religion per se, history and religion (the history of religion in particular) will be addressed in this thesis because they are such an important part of culture. To understand what death means to humans we need to examine the ways that humans have historically dealt with death. This means an examination of religion as well as history and philosophy. This may strike some as lying outside the scope of psychology and science and thus not relevant to a *scientific* discussion regarding people. Some may ardently oppose religion’s inclusion in scientific writing or at the very most, only allow it as a *piece* of “cultural consideration”. The November 2006 cover of *Time Magazine* entitled “God VS. Science” attests to the ongoing battle between science and religion for dominion over truth and reality. I would argue that religion is of enormous importance both currently and historically, to the human condition and is thus fair game for psychological inquiry. Regardless of whether or not an individual considers him/herself religious, the impact on one’s current worldview *was* and *is* shaped considerably by the historical and current religious beliefs of one’s culture (APA, 2003; Sue, 2001, 2004; Hall, 2006; LaRoche, 2005). As psychologists, by limiting our understanding of human unhappiness to personal-history

(that which has occurred only during the individual's lifetime), we have failed to understand how much individual unhappiness is an historical problem in the larger sense (Becker, 1973). Christianity will most often be the religion discussed, as a means of providing examples regarding religion as a whole. This is not because I view Christianity as more important but instead because it was the religion that Becker most frequently discussed and the religion that I am most familiar with myself.

Third, Becker was writing during the sixties and his language is sometimes sexist. Most notably is the exclusive use of male pronouns when referring to humanity in general ("Man must decide for himself..."). I have tried to remedy this in my own writing by using "she/he" or replacing the pronoun "man" with "human". This has proven somewhat cumbersome at times but until our culture develops a more agreed upon pronoun it is the best that I can do. When I have quoted Becker, I have left the quote as it was written.

Fourth, this thesis is heavy on theory. When considering theory it is probably best to consider it as an organizing framework or a system for understanding in which the "truths" being asserted are "real" or "true" within the context in which they are being explained in the theory. This seems in line with contemporary models of cultural competence that hold context, (i.e., culture and society) to be "...essential in constructing one's experience and reality" (La Roche, 2005, p.177). This position implies that the question is not so much: *Are these assertions "true" in the objective sense?*-but rather: *Do these assertions make sense as they are presented in this particular context, from this particular perspective?*

This is important because I will be discussing and attempting to understand all of humanity as viewed from a Western perspective. This thesis which is ultimately a critical

review of Becker's work is intended for a Western audience and the language used would likely meet with considerable disagreement from other cultures and even Western cultures. While much of this thesis is based on psychoanalysis and existentialism (Western thought/perspective), my hope is to present a formula that is "a-theoretical". This thesis is an attempt at the *formula* for culture. By formula I mean that specific worldviews and beliefs are arbitrary like the numbers one might insert in a formula (the Quadratic equation, the Pythagorean Theorem); if one "belief" or "truth" does not fit with a particular worldview, it will be possible to replace that "truth" with a more culturally relevant "truth". This formula, which is really the human condition, however will remain the same. Just as the Pythagorean Theorem functions to solve the problem of the hypotenuse of a triangle regardless of the numbers that are inserted, the formula of culture functions to solve the problem of the human condition. This human condition is simply that all humans are aware of life and death and one way or another all humans must and do solve the problem of death (Becker, 1973, 1975). This thesis is paradoxical in that it argues for relativism at the same time that it argues for universality, which brings me to the next point.

This thesis is not linear. That is, ideas and assertions do not necessarily lead neatly from one to the next in a straight line. Ideas are interdependent and the order in which I choose to organize and present information could just as easily and legitimately have been done otherwise. The best analogy I can think of is the familiar question: "What came first, the chicken or the egg?" This is unavoidable considering that the subject matter is humans and culture. This is not an excuse for being unclear and does not mean that there will be no organization. What will hopefully become apparent is that the human

condition is one of impossible paradoxes that defy tidy categorization. This is why we have the diversity of humans that we do.

Perhaps most important to some is the issue of science. Considering the current climate of clinical psychology and the emphasis placed on science (Sue, 2000; Hall, 1997) the importance of these questions can not be overemphasized: Is this thesis scientific? Can these assertions and this theory be tested empirically? The answer: Some of it can and has been. However, some of it is probably beyond the scope of science. Acknowledging the importance and power of science, I also feel that it is important to address some of its shortcomings as it relates to the study of humans. The medical model of treatment that is currently being applied to the study of humans ignores the complex symbolic nature of humans. The pursuit of empirically validated treatment outcomes implies a belief that a therapist can administer a specific treatment to a client's symptom and cure that symptom in much the same way that a medical doctor might administer penicillin to a staph infection on the arm thereby curing the infection. There is a degree of straightforwardness in the physical world of medical disorders that lends itself to scientific inquiry. This straightforwardness simply does not exist in the symbolic world of human psychological disorders. Due to the highly symbolic and abstract nature of humans it is sometimes nearly impossible to achieve the tangible data demanded by science. Becker (1973) states:

...researchers striving for objectivity tend to ignore data that cannot be operationalized, manipulated, or studied by randomized clinical trials; they tend to fragment complex, interrelated issues to make them empirically reachable;

they have been known to be methodologically rigorous but substantially vacuous. (p.37)

The point here is not to completely discredit science. It is a powerful way of understanding the world and should be given proper credit within the field of clinical psychology. It is not necessarily the empirical data and science that are the problem but rather the unwavering belief that these data alone constitute the legitimate ground for developing a comprehensive worldview or an adequate means for responding to the world's problems (Gyatso, T [The Dalai Lama], 2005). The existential argument entreats us to remember that "science itself is a human construction, inadequate for understanding the being that created it" (Prochaska and Norcross, 2003, p 105). As Abraham Maslow put it,

If the study of the uniqueness of the individual does not fit into what we know of science then so much the worse for the conception of science. It, too, will have to endure re-creation. (Maslow, 1969, p.54)

Finally, death is a major focus of this thesis. What death means to humans will be discussed at length because an understanding of what death means to humans is central to Becker's thesis. This material can be anxiety provoking, difficult to read, and at times come across as cynical and nihilistic. Becker often refers to the fictional and arbitrary nature of culture and calls into question our meaning-making systems. This thesis asks the reader to question her or his own view of the world and why it is that she/he places importance in some things and not others. This requires from the reader "...a critical and perhaps painful reflection on one's own culture, one's own hero system (*meaning-making*

system) and how one's own heroic strivings may be arbitrary..." (Johnson & Munley, 2004, p 369, italics mine).

Methods

The method for gathering information for this thesis included a review of Ernest Becker's books. *The Birth and the Death of Meaning* (1969), *The Denial of Death* (1973), *Escape from Evil* (1974), and *The Ernest Becker Reader* (2005). *The Ernest Becker Reader* is merely a compilation of Becker's scholarly writings published throughout his career. Most of these writings were later combined and synthesized in his three books which were just mentioned.

In order to get an idea of the current state of multicultural psychology, the American Psychological Association's (APA, 2003) *Guidelines on multicultural education, training, research, practice, and organizational change for psychologists* was reviewed. Additionally, a keyword search in PsychInfo of the term *ethnocentric monoculturalism* returned four results. Of these four articles, three were authored by the preeminent researcher in multicultural psychology, Derald Wing Sue. Articles and other multicultural researchers referenced in both the APA article and in the Sue articles lead to more sources on multicultural psychology.

Finally, because of his position as the authority on existential psychotherapy in modern times, Irving Yalom's 1980 text on the subject was included as a means of helping connect Becker's work to contemporary clinical psychology. As it turns out, Yalom mentions Becker on numerous occasions in this text. Some other authors mentioned by Becker were reviewed as well. Most notably among these was Otto Rank, upon whose work Becker based much of his theory. Drawing on my own personal

knowledge of existentialism, other authors were consulted as well and are cited to help support and clarify Becker's work where necessary.

Structure

First, a working definition of *culture* and *cultural worldviews* will be provided. The means by which people become trapped within their own cultural worldview will be explored via the concept of *ethnocentric monoculturalism*. Next, a brief introduction to Ernest Becker and orientation to his theory as well as its potential utility in modern psychology is presented. This will be followed by a more in depth review of Becker's theory on the nature of human awareness of death as a major basis for understanding the origins and function of culture. Empirical evidence for Becker's theory will be presented in the form of Terror Management Theory (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). Finally, the clinical and research implications of Becker's theories as they relate to multicultural psychology will be discussed.

Culture and the Cultural Worldview

What exactly is *culture* and a *cultural worldview*? This may seem obvious in some ways, but it is important to critically examine and define exactly what we mean when we talk about culture and a cultural worldview. As previously stated, the American Psychological Association [APA (2003)] defines culture as, "...The belief systems and value orientations that influence customs, norms, practices, and social institutions, including psychological processes" (p.380). Additionally, according to the APA (2003) culture is, "...the embodiment of a worldview through learned and transmitted beliefs, values, and practices, including religious and spiritual traditions" (p.380). Social psychologists Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski (1998) explain that *cultural*

worldviews “are humanly created beliefs about the nature of reality shared by groups of people...” (p.12). In an article on cultural competence, D. W. Sue (2001) describes the term “worldview” as something that one “espouses as reality”. “Each cultural/racial group” Sue explains, “may have its own different interpretation of reality and offer a different perspective on the nature of people, origin of disorders, standards of judging normality and abnormality...” (p.795). The concept of “reality” is prominent overtly or implicitly within all of these definitions of culture and worldview and its presence is confusing because it doesn’t seem to be used according to its English definition. Random House Webster’s College Dictionary defines reality as “the state or quality of being real, something that exists independently of ideas concerning it, something that exists independently of all other things and from which all other things derive”. However, Sue (2001) explains that reality is definable and capable of being imposed upon people. In other words, reality, at least as it is being used in this context, does *not* exist independently, it is not something *out there*, but is instead subject to human interpretation and definition. Sue also explains that power lies in the ability to define reality, and that, “Once reality is defined and imposed upon individuals and groups, it may become invisible, especially to those who live that reality” (p.853). In this way, cultural worldviews cease to be seen as *views* (as in a point of view), and instead become synonymous with “reality”.

Ethnocentric Monoculturalism

Ethnocentric monoculturalism describes the phenomenon whereby one group’s point of view comes to be viewed as reality. Ethnocentric monoculturalism is the “invisible veil of a worldview that keeps White Euro-Americans from recognizing the

ethnocentric basis of their beliefs, values and assumptions” (Sue, 2004, p.764). The defining features of ethnocentric monoculturalism are: (a) belief in the superiority of one group’s cultural heritage (history, values, language, traditions, arts and crafts, etc.); (b) belief in the inferiority of other groups’ heritage; (c) the dominant group’s ability (power) to define and impose reality on less powerful groups; (d) the manifestation of these ethnocentric values and beliefs in institutions (programs, policies, practices, structures, etc.); (e) its ability to operate outside of conscious awareness (Sue, et al., 1999, Sue 2004).

The belief in the superiority of one’s group leads to a sense of entitlement (Eidelson & Eidelson 2003). A belief in the inferiority of other groups follows and can lead to conflict with or exploitation of out-groups. Western society’s history of attempts to civilize “primitives heathens” or perhaps most glaringly the enslavement of millions of Africans serve as examples. “Behind these actions is the intrinsic belief of the superiority of one group and the inferiority of the other group” (Jones, 1997 as cited in Sue, 2004, p.765). The determination of inferiority is based heavily on differences from mainstream culture. According to Sue (2004), the power to define reality distinguishes ethnocentric monoculturalism from ethnocentrism. “All major groups and societies are ethnocentric. That is, they believe in the superiority of their own group and the inferiority of other groups” (p.765). It is only when one group possesses the power to impose reality and beliefs upon another group that ethnocentric monoculturalism occurs.

Ethnocentric monoculturalism reveals itself in the form of institutionalized bias. Structures, programs, policies and practices are utilized to create continuity and maximize efficiency. These programs and policies actually represent ethnocentric values

that demand a certain mode of operation from the individual. Sue (2004) explains how performance appraisal systems for hiring, retention, and promotion may favor individualistic “assertive” White male employees while discriminating against collective “unassertive” or “passive” Asian employees. Because of their success, those who operate according to institutionally biased values in areas such as management systems, communication systems, etc., are further reinforced in their belief that their way of being in the world is the right one. Their success seems to “prove” that this particular way of being in the world is correct.

Finally, ethnocentric monoculturalism operates outside of awareness. Sue (2004) refers to this as the *invisible veil*. “The invisible veil is a product of cultural conditioning; individuals are taught not only the prejudices and biases of society but also the many myths that serve to guide the interpretation of events” (p.766). Sue describes how this is the case with many of his White colleagues, that they are trapped in a Euro-American worldview that is invisible to them as a “view” and because of this they are only able to view the world from one perspective which they take to be reality.

So what happens when individuals encounter a worldview that is different from their own? Sue (2004) describes the response to his 1997 testimony before President Clinton’s Race Advisory Board and his participation in a congressional debriefing on the myth of a color-blind society. Sue reveals how many Americans reacted with considerable anger and defensiveness to his testimony. He was accused of being a racist who supported “preferential treatment” for minorities and some people even threatened to murder him. Sue explains how he has since often asked himself why people were so upset with what he said that they wanted to kill him. He wonders what “raw nerve” he had

touched. Is it because he challenged their view of the United States as a fair and just society? More importantly, he asks if it might have been because they saw his “testimony as potentially truthful about their own biases and prejudices” (p.763). For whatever reason, Sue’s views were threatening, so threatening that people said they wanted to kill him.

Ethnocentric monoculturalism traps people. It encapsulates us inside our own worldview. “To challenge that worldview as being only partially accurate, to entertain the notion that it may represent a false illusion...make seeing an alternative reality frightening and difficult” (Sue, 2004, p.762). What is it that is so threatening about alternative worldviews? A possible explanation can be found in Ernest Becker’s theory about culture. Essentially, Becker (1973, 1975) argued that alternative worldviews are threatening because they put a culture’s shared symbols in jeopardy. These symbols are associated with mortality at conscious and unconscious levels. In a sense, the destruction of our symbols is symbolic of our destruction. Exactly what these symbols are, and how and why they come to be associated with our sense of personal mortality is a major focus of this thesis.

Introduction to Ernest Becker: Relevance to Clinical Psychology

Ernest Becker was a cultural anthropologist who sought to explain human behavior. He is best known for his Pulitzer Prize winning book, “The Denial of Death” which was published in 1973. In this book, Becker argued that “...man’s innate and all-encompassing fear of death drives him to attempt to transcend death through culturally standardized hero systems and symbols” (1975, p.xvii). Becker is emphatic regarding the centrality of death in the human psyche: “...of all things that move man, one of the

principal ones is his terror of death” (1973, p.11). Although he emphasizes death, Becker’s theory is really about self-consciousness and the consequences that necessarily result from human self-consciousness.

To be conscious of ourselves is a terrible burden, Becker argued (1962, 1973, 1975). To be conscious of ourselves means to have an *awareness of being*, an *awareness of non-being*, and an *awareness of freedom*. Another way of saying this is that we know we are alive, we know we will die, and we are faced with choice. It is probably immediately obvious why awareness of death is burdensome. However, it may not be so obvious why our awareness of being alive and our awareness of freedom are a burden. Relying on thinkers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Otto Rank, Eric Fromm, and Sigmund Freud, Becker explains that humans have a terror of life, a terror of death, and a terror of freedom. “The human animal is characterized by two great fears...the fear of life and the fear of death”(Becker, 1973, p.53). This is the tragedy of life, “...man’s finitude, his dread of death and the overwhelmingness of life” (1973, p.63). The terror of freedom is not mentioned here by Becker but the problem of fear of freedom is ubiquitous throughout his writings. For instance, Becker explains that humans have a “need to be subject to someone” (1973, p.131) and that we experience fear at the thought of “emerging out of the family and into the world on one’s own responsibility and powers” (1973, p.134). The idea of freedom is complex and the desire to avoid freedom and the responsibility it implies, by giving up our freedom to others and to our culture, will be explored in detail.

The fear of life, death, and freedom are really different ways of talking about the same thing; they are interdependent, and each implies the other. The awareness of these

three together equates essentially to self-consciousness; and the terror of these three together is really the terror of self-consciousness. Becker (1973, 1975) sometimes also refers to this as the terror of existence. All humans experience "...terror of the world, the feeling of overwhelming awe, wonder, and fear in the face of creation, the miracle of it" (Becker, 1973, p.49). According to Becker, humans cope with these fears in two ways, through the "vital lie" of our character and through the "illusion" of society or culture (1962, 1973, 1975).

According to Becker, character and culture are in essence, the same thing. "Culture is a structure for rules, customs, and ideas, which serve as a vehicle for heroism [meaning-making]. It is a logical extension of the early ego development, and the need for self-esteem" (Becker, 1962, p.78). Both culture and character dictate what we think and how we think. How we view and respond to something depends on our character and on our culture. Culture seems to be a conglomeration of individual characters. Therefore, one could say that culture is determined by the sum of all of these individual characters. However, it might also be argued that the individual's character develops within the context of his/her culture and therefore, it is culture that determines the individual's character. It is difficult to separate out the two. "Culture and personality [character] dovetail into one coherent picture" (Becker, 1962, p.85).

The function of the *vital lie* of character and the *illusion* of culture is to serve as a buffer against anxiety that results from human self-consciousness (Becker, 1962, 1973, 1975). Humans, Becker argued, are unable to bear the reality of their situation and so they hide it from themselves. Essentially, we lack the courage. "It all boils down to a simple lack of strength to bear the superlative, to open oneself to the totality of

experience” (1973, p.49). This “totality of experience” Becker is referring to is that which is made possible by self-consciousness. He seems to view humans as perpetually young children who have been exposed to too much reality before their time. But we will never be able to deal with it, at least not completely, Becker says. So we develop defenses to cope. For Becker, culture is the *collective* solution (defense) to the individual’s fear of death, life, and freedom (self-consciousness). Character is the *individual* solution (defense) to the individual’s fear of death, life, and freedom. Character and culture imply each other; one simply does not exist without the other. The potential implication of this is that a threat to the integrity to one’s culture is a threat to the integrity of one’s sense of self. In the following section I will explore in depth Becker’s theory on the terror of existence and the role that character and culture play in helping humans cope with this terror.

In Depth Review of Becker’s Writings

In order to understand how character and culture function as a vital and illusory defense against fear I will first review Becker’s writings on the unique, paradoxical situation that *all* humans find themselves in. Next I will present his argument for death as a much more powerfully significant motivator of human behavior than most would like to admit. The fear of life and of freedom will be presented in a somewhat simultaneous fashion because I find them harder to separate into two discrete sections. Next, Becker’s theory on character as a vital lie will be presented, followed by his theory of culture as a necessary illusion. Because it is difficult to completely separate the phenomenon of character from the phenomenon of culture, elements of each will appear in these two sections. The reader may notice this sort of intrusion of concepts into other sections as

well. This is unavoidable due to the interdependent nature of these concepts. They have been separated somewhat artificially only to facilitate deeper understanding.

To date there are more than 212 empirical studies that have sought to empirically validate portions of Becker's ideas relating to death. These are the *Terror Management Theory* studies. These studies essentially investigate what happens when individuals are caused to deeply consider their own inevitable death, and they highlight the importance of belonging to a group or culture. A brief description of this material will be provided.

In the end, the implications for this deeper understanding of character and culture will be related to the concept of ethnocentric monoculturalism in multicultural clinical psychology. It is my intention to use Becker's theory to provide an explanation for why cultural encapsulation necessarily occurs in the hope that this greater insight will reduce the power that this phenomenon holds over us. It is my hope to undermine the reader's faith in his or her particular cultural worldview by getting him or her to recognize the illusion that all cultural systems represent. Concretely, this will occur (hopefully) with a greater understanding and respect of worldviews as arbitrary *points of view*. The recognition of the way that the terror of human existence drives us to cling *religiously* to cultural points of view as reality creates compassion for ourselves and others who believe differently than us because we can at least recognize that despite our differences, we are both coming from the same place. At the risk of sounding overly morbid, we are all in the same sinking boat so to speak.

The Paradoxical Nature of Humans: Half Creature, Half Symbolic

One of Becker's main points is that humans exist on two plains: a physical or material plain resulting from the physical limitations of our bodies; and an abstract or symbolic plain resulting from a highly developed brain that allows us to project ourselves into the past and the future, and allows us to reflect on our situation. Becker (1973) explains how there has always been something puzzling about humans, something that set us apart from other animals. The term *soul* has been used in the religious sense, to get at this *something* that sets humans apart. Philosophers have discussed the "core" of humans, conceptualizing it as "man's essence" (Becker, 1973). They viewed this *essence* as being something that actually existed in people, "something fixed in his nature, deep down, some special quality or substance" (Becker, 1973, p. 25). Becker relates how Erich Fromm discovered that there really is no *essence* the way that philosophers talked about it. The essence of man/woman is actually his/her "paradoxical nature, the fact that he is half animal and half symbolic" (1973, p.26). This, "paradoxical nature" according to Becker, leads to a uniquely painful human experience that he calls "individuality with finitude" (1973).

Individuality with finitude means simply this: People are animals that have symbolic identities that pull us out of nature (Becker, 1973). We are creatures with a name and a life history. We have a mind that soars and is capable of contemplating the planet and universe in which we exist. This is self-consciousness and it grants us power that other animals simply do not possess. Self-consciousness grants humans the status of a "small god in nature" (Becker, p.26, 1973). However, Becker states, there is a problem. At the same time that we are aware of our lives and feel ourselves special, we know that

it will all end, and could in fact do so at any given moment. That is the rub, and the paradox we are talking about: we are at once out of nature and “hopelessly in it.”

Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet to blindly and dumbly rot and disappear. (Becker, 1973, p.26)

Becker’s point is that when it comes to self-consciousness, the awareness of being is only one side of the coin; on the other side is awareness of non-being: death. We have a sense of ourselves as special individuals with personalities and dreams while, at the same time, we are aware of our finiteness. Because the lower animals do not possess self-consciousness or a symbolic identity, the lower animals do not face this dilemma. They have neither a concept of time, nor of themselves. They exist simply, “pulsating in a state of dumb being” (Becker, 1973, p.26). The lower animals live and die with a degree of thoughtlessness of which humans are incapable. An animal’s death may involve a few moments of fear and suffering but then it is over. Humans on the other hand, must lead their entire lives with the specter of death looming overhead. Becker argues that this dread is a problem that the human animal must solve.

This problem of human awareness of death is nothing new. The historic existence of religion attests to this. Drawing on the father of existentialism, Soren Kierkegaard, Becker (1973) points out that Christianity addressed this problem of self-consciousness in the myth of *The Fall of Man*. This is the story of how Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden as punishment for having eaten of the “fruit of knowledge”. This

myth explains how man/woman emerged from the instinctive blissful ignorance of the lower animals to become an animal that reflected on his/her condition,

He was given a consciousness of his individuality and his part-divinity in creation, the beauty and uniqueness of his face and his name. At the same time he was given the terror of the world and of his own death and decay. (Becker, 1973, p.69)

This awareness of death is not a light point. The “fruit of knowledge” represents self-consciousness and “Man’s Fall” was a fall into consciousness. There is a reason it was considered a punishment by God. The result of this “fall” was dread, or anxiety. Becker emphasizes that the lower animals, or “beasts”, do not feel dread because they lack a “spirit” (1973). By “spirit”, Becker means “self” or symbolic inner identity. Becker relies on Kierkegaard to further explain the paradox of being an individual with finitude,

If a man were a beast or an angel, he would not be able to be in dread. [That is, if he were utterly unself-conscious or totally un-animal.] Since he is a synthesis he can be in dread...man himself produces dread. (Kierkegaard as cited in Becker, 1973, p. 69, *Becker’s words in brackets*)

In other words, a beast dies but it is unaware that it dies. A beast is unselfconscious, unaware of its existence and inevitable death; thus the beast is spared the dread that would otherwise come with this knowledge. An angel is self-conscious, that is, aware of existence, but an angel is immortal and is thus spared the dreadful knowledge that it will one day cease to exist. The point Becker is making is that our

anxiety results from the sheer ambiguity of our situation, and from our total impotence to overcome this ambiguity, to be “purely and simply” an animal or an angel (Becker, 1973). Only if you “allow the full weight of this paradox [individuality with finitude] to sink down on your mind and feelings can you realize what an impossible situation it is for an animal to be in” (Becker, p.27, 1973). This is what Albert Camus was talking about in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, when he referred to the absurd nature of human existence (Camus, 1942). The human paradox is that we are animals that are conscious of our limitation. We are angels that die; and it is terrifying.

This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression-and with all this yet to die. (Becker, 1973, p.87)

Once again, it is the dualistic, paradoxical nature of human existence that makes our situation inherently ambiguous and it is the cause of human anxiety, or dread. This according to Becker, is the consequence of individuality with finitude. However, the true focus of dread is not ambiguity itself but is instead self-consciousness. In Christianity this is seen in the judgment that God enacted upon man- that if Adam ate of the fruit of knowledge, “though shall surely die.” In less religious terms: “...the final terror of self-consciousness is the knowledge of one’s own death” (Becker, 1973, p.70). This was the human animal’s “peculiar sentence”, the meaning of the Garden of Eden myth, and according to Becker, “the rediscovery of modern psychology: that death is man’s peculiar and greatest anxiety” (Becker, 1973, p. 70).

At times, Becker seems to use “awareness of death” and “self-consciousness” interchangeably, while at others times, he argues that awareness of death is only a piece of self-consciousness-the piece that is problematic. A careful reading of Becker reveals that he really considers the awareness of death to be one piece of the problem of self-consciousness. As stated already, Becker believes that we have a fear of life and of freedom as well. I think that Becker emphasizes death as *the* problem here because he is trying to get the point across that it is a much bigger deal than we care to admit and that we do in fact run from death.

Becker is not wrong to emphasize the terror of death. His account regarding death is integral to an understanding of ourselves and of his theory. Additionally, because we are talking about a human universal, there is a uniting potential for increasing our respect and understanding of other cultures. If we can follow the universal situations of human experience all the way up to the point where these experiences begin to split-off, we might get a glimpse of the way ethnocentric monoculturalism comes to pass. However, it is still too soon to integrate Becker’s work with ethnocentric monoculturalism. The role that our fear of death plays in the paradoxical nature of humans is explored in detail in the next section.

The Terror of Death

According to Becker, one of the great “rediscoveries” of modern thought is: “that of all things that move man, one of the principal ones is his terror of death” (Becker, 1973, p.11). Becker talks about a *rediscovery* of the terror of death because modern man/woman has done something strange with the idea of death: He/she has buried it

beneath mountains of scientific findings and technological advancements (Becker, 1973).

Quoting Sigmund Freud himself,

Is it not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude towards death we are once more living psychologically beyond our means, and must reform and give truth its due? Would it not be better to give death the place in actuality and in our thoughts which properly belongs to it, and to yield a little more prominence to that unconscious attitude towards death which we have hitherto so carefully suppressed? This hardly seems a greater achievement, but rather a backward step...but it has the merit of taking somewhat more into account the true state of affairs...(Freud,1915- as cited in Becker, 1973, p. 11)

What Freud means by “a backward step” and what Becker means by “rediscovery” is that death and the knowledge of death are nothing new. Humans of course have been aware of it for thousands of years. However, death has been obscured, covered from view as if by vines on a long forgotten monument. Becker believes we have buried death so that we do not have to actually acknowledge the reality of it and the fundamental role death plays in life. We deny it Becker says.

According to Becker, a major goal of religion is to alleviate our anxiety regarding existence. “Religion solves the problem of death, which no living individuals can solve...” (Becker, 1973, p.203). Religion seems to accomplish this in at least two ways. The first is by offering an explanation for existence. The creation myth provided by

Christianity offers an explanation for how humans came to be and, as has already been mentioned, an explanation for how and why we are different from other animals (why we have self-consciousness). The second way religion alleviates our anxiety is by offering humans a means of transcending the terror that accompanies this self-consciousness through the concept of heroism. Becker explains how the hero is ubiquitous in religion and that he/she is revered for the heroic way in which he/she deals with or conquers death. "Religion, then, gives the possibility of heroic victory in freedom..." (Becker, 1973, p.203). According to Becker, we admire those who have the courage to face death because we are doubtful if we ourselves would be so brave (1973).

In ancient or primitive times, the hero was the person who could enter the spirit world of the dead and return alive (Becker, 1973). Christianity was no exception and had its own version of the hero, Jesus Christ, who entered the world of the dead and then returned alive. All historical religions addressed this problem of the end of life, each solving death in its own way (Becker, 1973). The accuracy of this statement can be seen in the concepts of reincarnation, Heaven, Nirvana, and Jannah, which are all answers to the problem of non-existence. They provide comfort because they all tell a person that he or she will continue on.

Life and the opposite side of the same coin...death, is the fundamental problem for man/woman, and it must be solved (Becker, 1973). Philosophy has also wrangled with the problem of death. Death became philosophy's "muse" as can be seen in ancient Greece right on through the writings of Heidegger, and modern existentialism (Becker, 1973). Darwin and science wrestled with death as well.

Today, According to Becker, the power of religion to quell our fears of death has waned. This is a result of the enlightenment, the rise of science and Freud's psychoanalysis (Becker, 1973). Becker sees science and especially psychology as "...gradually trying to supplant religious and moral ideology..." (Becker, 1973). When we look at religion and science (psychology) from the perspective of different methods for explaining human reality, we see that they are actually both attempting to do the same thing. Death is a motivating force in both systems though it seems underemphasized and often strangely absent in science and psychology. That de-emphasis we shall see is exactly the point. By focusing on the complexities of science and the minutia of the psyche, we avoid a focus on the reality of our situation. This is what Becker meant when he said that we have buried death beneath mountains of data and scientific findings. By getting caught up in the trees we miss the larger forest, but we are glad to miss *this* particular forest. Science and psychology have served as the vines that cover our awareness of death. As will become apparent, science and psychology are merely two pieces of our culture designed to help us deny death.

The "Healthy-Minded" Argument

Becker addresses what he refers to as the *healthy minded argument* (1973). Essentially, this is the argument that the terror of death is not a natural innate characteristic of man/woman. The infant has no concept of such an abstract idea as death until at least three or five years. But even if the child has no concept or fear of death, he/she does still have anxieties says Becker (1973). The child is completely dependent upon its mother and experiences loneliness and frustration when its needs/desires are not gratified. If the mother were to leave, the child's world would disappear, and eventually,

so would the infant. Becker (1973) says that at some level the infant has to sense this. This is called the anxiety of “object-loss” and “Isn’t this anxiety, then, the fear of annihilation” (Becker, 1973, p.13). The healthy-minded argument camp would answer “NO”. They would argue that if parents do a good enough job, the child will grow up able to contain his/her knowledge of death in some manageable accepting way. This argument places the burden of anxiety on the child’s nurture, not his/her nature (Becker, 1973). Instead, so this argument goes, the fear of death is something that society creates in the child. Thus, it is only those who have bad early experiences who are most affected by this fear of death, only people with “sour character structures”. Philosophers like Schopenhauer (who hated his mother) are the ones who pronounce death “the muse of philosophy” (Becker, 1973). The fear of death is viewed as an outgrowth from scarred European existentialists, Lutheran and Protestant theologians and their “heritage life-denial” (Becker, 1973). Why not regard the “living of life in love and joy” as the “real and basic” center of man/woman?-the healthy minded argument asks (Becker, 1973, p 14).

The “Morbidly-Minded” Argument

Becker does not necessarily totally disagree with the “healthy-minded” argument. However, he does argue that it is merely one side. From the “morbidly minded” perspective, where Becker places himself, early experiences may heighten fears and anxiety but nevertheless, fear of death is innate and present in everyone and it is *the* fear that influences all other fears. (Becker, 1973) No one is immune to this fear, no matter how much it may be disguised. So said William James, death is the “worm at the core” (Becker, 1973). Becker cites “countless authorities” many of whom were psychologists

and psychoanalysts in defense of the “morbidly-minded” argument: William James, Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Gregory Zilboorg, Erich Fromm, Soren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre, and Martin Heidegger to name just a few. However, he acknowledges that there are just as many distinguished authorities in the other camp. He laments that it is probably not possible to ever really decide whether the fear of death is the basic anxiety of humanity. “The most that one can do is to take sides, to give an opinion based on the authorities that seem to him most compelling, and present some of the most compelling arguments” (Becker, 1973, p. 15). I think Becker could get around this dilemma at least somewhat by arguing instead that self-consciousness is the cause of this basic anxiety of humanity; that is ultimately his point anyways.

However, despite my previous assertion that it is self-consciousness and not just death that Becker really views as problematic, Becker’s entire argument *is* nonetheless based on the premise that the fear of death is universal and that it is terrifying and all consuming to openly acknowledge (Becker, 1973). Becker believes that people are terrified of death but they do not think that they are. This denial is made possible by the fact that for most people death “...rarely shows its true face” (Becker, 1973, p.15). However, there beneath all pretences or appearances, the fear of death lies. Becker quotes the psychoanalyst Gregory Zilborg,

For behind the sense of insecurity in the face of danger, behind the sense of discouragement and depression, there always lurks the basic fear of death, a fear which undergoes most complex elaborations and manifests itself in many indirect ways....No one is free of the fear of death...We

may take for granted that the fear of death is always present
in our mental functioning. (as cited in Becker, 1973, p.16)

William James and post-Darwinians viewed the fear of death as a biological and evolutionary issue (Becker, 1973). That is, the enduring drive to maintain life, the instinct for self-preservation is a manifestation of the fear of death. Zilborg again,

Such constant expenditure of psychological energy on the
business of preserving life would be impossible if the fear
of death were not as constant. The very term "self-
preservation" implies an effort against some force of
disintegration; the affective aspect of this fear, fear of
death. (as cited in Becker, 1973, p.16)

What is behind the battle against heart disease, the quest for the cure for cancer, the "War on Terror" if not the desire to avoid the death? Behind all of our normal functioning the fear of death must lie in order for our organism to be "armed" in the direction of self-preservation. But this fear can not be constantly conscious, argues Becker, otherwise we could not function normally. The terror of death must be effectively repressed if we are to live with any sort of modicum of comfort (Becker, 1973). Repression means more than putting something away and "forgetting where it is we put it" (Becker, 1973, p. 17). To repress something, according to Zilborg means to, "...maintain a constant psychological effort to keep the lid on and inwardly never relax our watchfulness" (as cited in Becker, 1973, p. 17).

This idea of repression can help us understand what seems to amount to an
"impossible paradox: the ever-present fear of death in the normal biological functioning

of our instinct of self-preservation as well as our utter obliviousness to this fear in our conscious life" (Becker, 1973, p. 17). I think that what Becker is trying to convey here is not so much that we deny that we will die. Instead, he is saying that we deny that we are even afraid of death. Becker **does** also argue that we deny that we will die, and there will be more on this later. For now, it seems that the initial step towards this ultimate denial of our mortality is to first of all deny that we are afraid of it. Of course, even after this denial, we continue to act in ways that demonstrate a desire to avoid death. Zilborg once again,

Therefore in normal times we move about actually without ever believing in our own death, as if we fully believed in our own corporeal immortality. We are intent on mastering death...A man will say, of course, that he knows he will die some day, but he does not really care. He is having a good time living, and he does not think about death and does not care to bother about it-but this is purely intellectual, verbal admission. The affect of fear is repressed. (as cited in Becker, 1973, p.17)

Again, by denying that our death is any sort of a big deal to us, by saying that we are too busy focusing on life, we better enable ourselves to hide our mortality from ourselves. After all, if we convince ourselves death is no big deal, then why even bother to think about it?

Biology and evolution are crucial to this argument (Becker, 1973). Animals had to be protected by fear-responses in order to survive. This was not only fear of other animals

but fear of nature herself (Becker, 1962, 1973, 1975). It does not make sense to assume that this response has disappeared in the human infant who is even more exposed and helpless than any other creature (Becker, 1973). Quite to the contrary, it makes more sense to assume that this fear was heightened. Early humans that were most anxious or “realistic” about their “limited powers in a dangerous world”, were the most likely to survive and pass this trait on. What resulted is a “...hyperanxious animal who constantly invents reasons for anxiety even where there are none” (Becker, 1973, p.17).

One could make the argument that this fear is programmed in the “lower” animals in the form of instincts and that humans do not really operate from instincts and so have no programmed fears. Becker argues that our instincts are still there but, due to human self-consciousness, these instincts have morphed. “Man’s fears are fashioned out of the ways in which he perceives his world” (Becker, 1973, p.18). There will be more on this point later as I present Becker’s theory on the development of character. For now, I just want to reemphasize that the inner world of the human is symbolic. Psychoanalytically speaking, the experiences of the infant with its fears, frustrations, and feelings of hate occur at a symbolic level but they represent or arise not from sexual drives as Freud originally asserted but instead from the fear of annihilation (Becker, 1973). The main point Becker wishes to make is that the infant’s inner world is complex, confusing, ambiguous, and ultimately frightening. Death is a complex symbol. It is present in the infant and becomes elaborated in a most complex manner and manifests itself in indirect ways such as nightmares, fear of dogs, strangers, bugs, or the lack of control over anything (Becker 1973). Becker makes a strong argument. After all, what do all of these things represent to the child if not the fear of annihilation?

Freedom and the Fear of Life

Closely tied to the fear of annihilation is the problem of the fear of freedom. The fear of freedom takes many forms and at times appears to be synonymous with what Becker refers to as our “fear of life”. Yet at other times Becker describes our problem with freedom as stemming from our fear of death. Sometimes Becker suggests that it is freedom itself that sparks our fear of life and of death. All of this can prove confusing if we seek a linear formulation of these concepts. However, if we take the position that these phenomena (fear of life, fear of death, and fear of freedom) are all interconnected “ingredients” required to bake the “cake” that is self-consciousness, it becomes easier (hopefully) to deal with the ambiguity.

Keeping this interconnectedness in mind I do want to attempt to separate out this idea of freedom as much as possible in the service of greater understanding. In order to do this I first want to set up the world as Becker sees it with regards to freedom. Next, I will rely on Irving Yalom to augment our understanding freedom and of the relationship between *meaning* and freedom. Through this I hope to better map out for the reader exactly what it is we are talking about when say “freedom”. Yalom relies on the same sources that Becker does to conceptualize freedom (Heidegger, Sartre, Kierkegaard, Fromm, and Rank) and although I would not go so far as to say that Yalom explains the problem of freedom better, he is more concise. Finally, I will present Becker’s conceptualization of the psychoanalytic phenomenon of transference as a method for giving up our freedom. Through all of this I hope to demonstrate Becker’s belief that humans are terrified of freedom and how a fear of freedom can be viewed as synonymous with a fear of life. Finally, this understanding of freedom will set the stage for the

remaining sections that describe *how* humans go about giving up freedom through the vital lie of character and the illusion of culture.

Freedom: As consequence of self-consciousness

Becker's conception of freedom is complex but it is perhaps the most important part of his theory to grasp because in the end, Becker explains that what our character and culture actually represent are methods for giving up our freedom and a way of ultimately denying our own mortality, "...man wants above all to endure and prosper, to achieve immortality in some way. Because he knows he is mortal the thing he most wants to deny is this mortality" (Becker, 1975, p. 93). But how to deny our own mortality? The answer to this question, Becker (1975) explains, is to relinquish our freedom by the "giving over" of ourselves to "structures which embodied immunity power" (p.93). By "giving over of ourselves" Becker is talking about the giving over of our freedom, by "structures" Becker is referring to characterological and cultural ideologies, and by "immunity power" he is referring to immunity from mortality.

Based on this preceding explanation it would seem that humans fear freedom because we fear death. But for Becker, a fear of freedom also seems to be synonymous with a fear of life, "People take the overwhelmingness of creation and their own fears and desires and project them in the form of intense mana onto certain power figures to which they then defer" (Becker, 1975, p. 50). What Becker is saying with this quote is that the awesomeness of life (creation) is far more than the human animal can bear on its own. Humans have unrealistic aspirations for self-perpetuation and continued existence (immortality). We recognize these desires as unrealistic. We are conscious of our own limitations in a chaotic universe and so we search for someone or something beyond us

and hope against all hope and reason that some person or some ideological cause has the power to offer us a way to transcend our fate and the absurdity of our situation, "The tragedy of evolution is that it created a limited animal with unlimited horizons" (Becker, 1975, p. 153). Once again Becker is referring to the problem created by self-consciousness.

Humans are the only animals who do not have a built-in instinctive mechanism for narrowing down the overwhelmingness of the world that would allow them to act automatically (Becker, 1975). Humans cannot act instinctively and unreflectively the way a raccoon does. What this means is that humans are *free* to choose how they act. This freedom is far more problematic than it might seem, explains Becker, because of the overwhelming possibility presented by choice and the lack of any secure ground upon which to base our choices. To combat this overwhelmingness, "...men have to artificially and arbitrarily restrict their intake of experience and focus their output on decisive action" (Becker, 1975, p.153). Becker is talking about psychoanalytic concepts of repression and denial here. The child represses himself out of fear (Becker, 1973). Humans have to do this to keep from going mad, says Becker. It is the absurdity of the reality of the human condition that self-consciousness permits (or forces) us to see that would drive us mad. As Camus explained, "the absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (1955, p.28). Once again, that "human need" is, "...above all to endure and prosper, to achieve immortality in some way" (Becker, 1975, p. 93). In addition to "endure" which means to continue to exist, Becker uses the word "prosper". By including prosper Becker is getting at a certain quality of life that extends beyond mere continued existence. By prosper Becker is

talking about our need to expand ourselves into the world in a meaningful way.

Meaningfulness and freedom are strange bedfellows and not easily reconciled because as we shall soon see; if humans are free, then we, and no one and nothing else, are responsible for the creation of meaning in our lives. The deeper implications of this perspective are more problematic than might at first be apparent.

Meaning

Becker argues that humans willingly surrender their freedom to powerful others and to society in order to create the illusion that they are not responsible for their lives. "Man has an extreme passion for authority and wishes to be governed by unrestricted force" (Becker, 1973, p. 132). This quote is a paraphrasing of Freud and it might seem a bit extreme. What Becker is driving at is that people gain a sense of safety and protection that is almost magical by believing that someone or something else is responsible for them. This feeling of protection from a powerful leader or structure is the same as the, "... 'oceanic feeling' that they enjoyed when they were loved and protected by their parents" (Becker, 1973, p.133). Humans instill these powerful others or structures with illusory power in order to gain some modicum of comfort and then hide or deny the fact that this is what they have done so as not to undermine the illusion. With this explanation we are moving toward Becker's and Rank's explanation of transference.

It is important to stress that we avoid freedom and responsibility not only out of a fear of death but also out of a fear of the overwhelming incomprehensibility of life and the dizzying possibility offered by freedom, "The natural mystery of birth, growth, consciousness, and death is taken over by society" (Becker, 1975, p.123). What Becker means by this is that culture or society takes over the responsibility for making sense out

of our existence. Culture answers the questions: "Why am I here? What do I do with my body? How should I be?" Without culture or a powerful other to provide a framework of meaning, the individual would be free to answer these questions in any way, which means that the individual is *responsible* for answering these questions. As we shall see, that is a tremendous burden to bear. One way or another, these questions must be answered and people lack the courage to do this on their own (Becker, 1973).

Yalom (1980) explains freedom is a problem because it implies an isolating sense of responsibility and "...to the extent that one is responsible for one's life, one is alone" (p. 357). Responsibility means that one is the author of one's own life and according to Yalom, if we admit authorship we must give up the notion that there is some higher power or powerful other who creates and protects us. "Deep loneliness is inherent in the act of self-creation. One becomes aware of the universe's cosmic indifference" (p. 357). Yalom's use of the term "cosmic indifference" is significant here and goes right to the heart of our fear of freedom. If the world is indifferent to our lives, how can our lives have any meaning? The ultimate implication of freedom and the reason we fear it, is meaningless.

Yalom (1980, p.422) sums up the problem of meaninglessness quite nicely, explaining that it is a dilemma of two opposing truths.

- 1) The human being seems to require meaning. We apparently need absolutes-firm ideals to which we can aspire and guidelines by which to steer our lives.
- 2) The existential concept of freedom posits...that the only true absolute is that there are no absolutes. An existential

position holds that the world is contingent-that is, everything that is could as well have been otherwise; that human beings constitute themselves, their world their situation within the world, that there exists no "meaning", no grand design in the universe, no guidelines for living other than those the individual creates.

This appears to be a hopeless dilemma, for an animal that requires meaning to be thrown into a world in which there is none, a universe that according to the existentialists is completely indifferent to one's existence.

This idea of "cosmic indifference" and the meaninglessness it implies is ubiquitous throughout Becker's writing and I think it is one of the most difficult pieces of Becker's theory and existential theory in general, for people to swallow. Essentially what Yalom is saying with the term "cosmic indifference" is that the cosmos, the universe, the world, does not care one way or the other about one's existence. On a cosmic level, one is ultimately of no more significance than a dog, a fish, a potato, or a turnip. When faced with statements such as this, I think most people vehemently protest that their life most certainly is meaningful and of much more significance than a potato. I think that Becker, Yalom, and other existentialists would agree but point out that the protestor him or herself is the one who instills meaning into his or her life, not the universe. One's life is only meaningful to the extent that one believes it is meaningful.

Suicide may be the most glaring piece of empirical evidence that ultimately we are the one's who decide if our life is significant or not. Albert Camus wrote that "there is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether or not

life is worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy” (p.3, 1955). One of the implications of this statement is that the answer is not predetermined and is open for debate. Further, any decision will be based upon human reasoning and human meaning. According to Camus, suicide amounts to a confession, a confession “that life is too much for you or that you do not understand it...it is not worth the trouble” (1955, p.5).

If one does not believe one’s life is significant; one can prove it through suicide. It might be argued that the loved ones who are left behind demonstrate that one’s life was significant even if one thought that it was not. People who love and care about us may find that our existence is significant but again, our existence is only significant to them to the extent that they believe that it is. This is human created significance, not cosmic significance. This is what Becker and other existentialists mean by cosmic indifference. If there is no one who loves me and believes that my life is significant, if I am totally alone, and if I myself do not believe my life has significance, then how can it have significance? To whom or to what is my life significant? From the existentialist perspective the devastating answer to this question can only be: no one and nothing.

The point here is not to argue that because there is no inherent meaning in the world there really is no point to living and one might as well commit suicide. This is the point: Humans are not born into a world of meaning; humans create meaning out of the world they are born into. A major argument Becker (1973, 1975) makes and one that is key to this thesis is that the culture or society that an infant is born into creates the *illusion* that one is born into a world of meaning. Humans do not have the confidence in themselves to believe in meanings that they themselves created. We have a “natural

feeling of inferiority in the face of the massive transcendence of creation” (Becker, 1973). There is a fictional nature to human meanings and to understand this is potentially the most powerfully liberating realization that we can make (Becker, 1973). Human meanings are not inherently representative of absolute reality even though we desperately want them to be. I am already hinting at Becker’s conception of culture as a natural defense against the anxiety generated by the human condition but I do not want to move too far into this just yet. For now I want to linger a bit more on the implications of freedom for meaninglessness and the way in which a fear of freedom is also a fear of life.

Based on the preceding explanation, to say that humans create meaning is to say that humans are the author’s of their lives. If humans are the author’s of their lives, then they are responsible. And if humans are responsible that means that they are free. According to Becker, human meanings are the only ones that we know (1973). This is problematic because there is so much that we do not understand. One of the reasons for the creation of Gods is to allow humans to feel confident that our meaning systems come from something that is bigger than us. This allows us to take solace in the belief that even if we do not understand, God does. Still, we have our doubts, Becker says. We cannot escape our nagging sense that “nature seems unconcerned, even viciously antagonistic to human meanings...” (1973, p.120). Of course, if we read Becker closely, we know that he does not view nature as “viciously antagonistic” to human meaning. Ocean waves sink a ship just as readily and with just as much indifference as they deposit it safely on the shore. The problem is nature’s indifference to human meanings and its power to inexplicably destroy what is meaningful to us. Other humans can destroy our meanings as well, “...human meanings are fragile, ephemeral; they are constantly being discredited by

historical events and natural calamities” (Becker, 1973, p.120). Becker explains how a Hitler can devastate centuries of religious and scientific meaning, or that an earthquake “can negate a million times the meaning of a personal life”(p.120). Any illusions one has about a world that is inherently just and meaningful would seem to be shattered by events such as the holocaust or a massive earthquake, both of which snuff out life like it was nothing. The main point to take from all of this is that if there is to be any meaning in this world, it has to come from humans. The upside to this is that we have the *freedom* to create ourselves. The down side of freedom, argues Becker, is that we *have* to create ourselves and our meanings and as the Hitler’s and the Tsunamis of the world demonstrate, our meanings are terribly fragile.

Again, the way we escape freedom and the responsibility for constructing a meaningful life is by constituting ourselves and our world in such a way as to hide the fact that we are the one’s who have constituted and created ourselves. In order to avoid this truth, we absorb ourselves in the everyday world of familiar activities while the “primordial world of vast emptiness and isolation is buried and silenced, only to speak in brief bursts during nightmares and mythic visions.” (Yalom, 1980, p.358). We deny our responsibility and hide from ourselves our freedom and responsibility to create our lives. Thus the fear of freedom can also be seen as a fear of life. Both Yalom and Becker cite Erich Fromm who argued,

As long as one was an integral part of that world, unaware of the possibilities and responsibilities of individual action, one did not need to be afraid of it. When one has become an individual, one stands alone and faces the world in all its

perilous and overpowering aspects. (as cited in Yalom, 1980, p.361)

By “that world” Fromm is referring to the everyday world provided by one’s culture. This quote by Fromm brings us back to the initial argument that to be truly free means to be alone with the terrifying reality of insignificance. Hopefully it is beginning to become more clear why freedom is not necessarily always a good thing and hopefully setting the stage for an understanding of how humans willingly give up their freedom through phenomenon of transference.

Transference

Becker’s understanding of transference takes us beyond the therapeutic encounter whereby the patient treats the analyst as a parental object. Becker explains that transference first occurs when humans are infants and that all transference is transference of power and terror (1973). The child is overwhelmed by the terror of existence and the infinite possible ways of being in the world (freedom). To combat this fear, the child transfers or banishes these fears into the parents and comes to view the parents as all-powerful protectors. This is a fictitious overestimation of the power that the parents actually hold. This occurs again later in therapy in the more familiar form of transference that Freud used to explain that “peculiarly intense attachment” and overestimation of qualities that the patient developed towards the analyst (p.128). This sort of blowing up of the analyst to larger than life proportions is analogous to the overestimation of parental figures in childhood. Becker writes,

In the transference we see the grown person as a child at heart, a child who distorts the world to relieve his

helplessness and fears, who sees things as he wishes them to be for his own safety, who acts automatically and uncritically, just as he did in the pre-Oedipal period.
(Becker, 1973, p.129).

The implication of Becker's explanation that the child (and the adult) "sees things as he wishes them to be for his own safety" is that fear drives the phenomenon of transference. This is the fundamental difference between Becker's understanding of transference and Freud who believed that sexual motivations were at the root of transference. In the end, Becker agrees with Freud that the child does seek merger with the "parental omnipotence" but the child does so not out of *desire* as Freud argued, but instead out of *cowardice* (1973). This Becker explains, is what Alfred Adler meant when he said that "transference is fundamentally a problem of *courage*" (1973, 142).

The true motivation for transference is at its most obvious in childhood because this is when we see the true nature of fear in its undisguised and unabashed form. Becker quotes William James who said "Fear is fear of the universe" (1973, p.145). This, Becker explains, "is the fear of childhood, the fear of emerging into the universe, of realizing one's own independent individuality, one's own living experience" (p.145). The child has a fear of life itself. This explains the symbiosis with the mother that young children experience, and the anxiety of separation. The young human animal relieves the universe of its terror through a merger with the omnipotent mother. The essence of transference then is a "taming of terror" (Becker, 1973, p.145).

One potential problem with Becker's argument here is that he focuses heavily on the *unrealistic* sense of safety that the child gains through close contact with the mother

and ignores what seems to me to be a very realistic sense of safety. The helpless infant would in fact perish if it were not for the mother who provides it with food, shelter, and safety. In one sense, the infant is quite correct to endow the caregiver with power. Becker does acknowledge this, "The child does partly control his larger fate by it [transference]..." (1973, p. 146). What Becker means by this is that the infant is in fact able to "control" its mother by crying or acting in ways that please the mother thereby ensuring the mother will pay attention to and care for the infant. Additionally, Becker's previous explanations of the duality of the human condition, that is, his argument that we are half animal and half symbolic can be viewed as evidence that he does recognize the reality and necessity of real physical safety provided by the mother. His writing seems to suggest that one way to look at transference might be to say that what makes it possible is the fact that there is a bit of accuracy in it. It is not that transference is a completely ridiculous and gross error of judgment on the part of the child or patient; instead, as Becker and Freud have stated, it is an *overestimation* of the others power.

"The transference object always looms larger than life size
because it represents all of life and hence all of one's fate.

The transference object becomes the focus of one's
freedom because one is compulsively dependent on it..."

(Becker, 1973, p. 147)

The tendency to overestimate is driven by fear and our freedom is limited by our dependency (both real and imagined) on the powerful transference object. What this overestimation represents is a focus of natural terror into an individual being, "which allows the child to find the power and the horror all in one place instead of diffused

throughout a chaotic universe” (Becker, 1973, 145). The child can now act in ways that please the transference object to ensure the child’s continued safety and this amounts to a restriction of freedom because the child is acting to please the powerful other. The child binds itself to the powerful transference object in an effort to gain some control over terror, awe, and death (Becker, 1973). This does not eliminate all terror though. Becker explains that the child still experiences *transference terror* which is the fear of displeasing or losing the transference object (1973). Transference seems to be a transference of power and it continues to occur in adulthood.

According to Becker, even as adults we do not have confidence in our own abilities to make the world a safe and predicable place. This lack of confidence is a realistic assessment of our situation but it is tremendously anxiety provoking and so we seek to merge with powerful others. This is not visible on the surface and most adults manage to go around appearing independent “playing the role of parents themselves and seem quite grown up- and so the are” (Becker, 1973, p.131). Adults could not function if they continued to carry the same feelings of awe for their own parents, continuing to obey them automatically. Nevertheless, argues Becker, our need to be subject to a powerful other remains, driven by a realistic assessment of our situation that nags and whispers to us as Yalom says in “nightmares and mythic visions” (1980). The sense of power and awe that children have for their parents gets transferred as adults to teachers, supervisors, therapists and other strong personalities (Becker, 1973).

Transference is not just something that happens in childhood and again in psychoanalysis; it occurs everyday in all of our relationships. Probably the most interesting implication and the point Becker is driving at is that the power to dominate

lays not so much in the powerful parent, analyst or leader, but instead within the heart of the dominated. Humans have “a passion for authority” and actually desire to be governed argues Becker. The reason people want to be controlled by a powerful other is because we know we lack the power and strength to make the world safe and we desperately want to believe that someone does.

Beyond ourselves we sense chaos. We can't really do much about this unbelievable power, except for one thing; we can endow certain person's with it. The child takes natural awe and terror and focuses them in an individual being, which allows him to find power and horror in one place instead of diffused throughout a chaotic universe. (p.145)

Transference then can be viewed as a voluntary relinquishment of freedom in an effort to “tame” the terror we feel in the face of an overwhelming universe that is completely indifferent to our existence. Indifference is unbearable because of the cosmic meaninglessness it implies and responsibility it demands of humans to create our own meaning in our lives. Indifference is also terrifying because if the world is indifferent, that means we can do nothing to predict or to stop terrible things from happening.

In his final book *Escape from Evil* Becker (1975) explained that the purpose of “primitive man's” use of ritual was to create the illusion that the world was not chaotic, unpredictable, and meaningless i.e., indifferent. “...by means of the techniques of ritual men imagined that they took firm control of the material world...” (p.7). Ritual was so important because in the world of ritual there is no such thing as accidents. If a volcano erupted when a God was upset, people could do things to ensure that the God remained

happy thereby preventing the volcano from erupting. In the world of ritual, everything happens for a reason and can therefore be explained and controlled using the proper ritual. This explanation demonstrates how cultural customs can be intimately tied to life and death.

Summing up what has been presented so far, the fear of freedom is a fear of chaos. The world is overwhelming and humans are terrified by the magnitude of limitless possibility. It is a monumental task, deciding how to create meaning in an unstructured world and humans have a realistic sense of personal inadequacy when it comes to doing so. Through the act of transference, humans fool themselves into believing that someone else has the power, knowledge, and wisdom to decide how to live a life and to protect them (us). Through a blind and trusting faith in the powerful transference object, humans can escape the anxiety of ambiguity by focusing their efforts and energy on fulfilling whatever it is they believe will please the transference object. In this sense, transference is the banishment of fear to the delegated power of others. In the next section, I will attempt to combine the material presented so far in this thesis to explore Becker's theory on the development of our character.

Character as a Vital Lie

According to Becker, our character is a defense against self-consciousness, "...a persons' character is a defense against despair, an attempt to avoid insanity because of the *real* nature of the world" (Becker, 1973, p.63). Due to self-consciousness humans are overwhelmed by the possibility of freedom and life and the inevitability of death. We are unable to take our bodies for granted the way other animals do (Becker, 1973). We have seen how in a sense, Nature *protected* the lower animals with instincts and how, with the

evolution of self-consciousness in humans, “she [Nature] created an animal who has no defense against full perception of the external world, an animal completely open to experience” (Becker, 1973, p.50). It seems that we know too much for our own good. The universe is too much, too big for us. “Men aren’t built like gods, to take in the whole world; they are built like creatures, to take in the piece of ground in front of their noses...” (Becker, 1973, p.178).

In order to deal with the terrifying absurdity of our situation, humans must narrow down the world to make it more manageable; we must shut off experience, develop an obliviousness to the terrors of the world and our own anxieties (Becker, 1973). “Man had to invent and create out of himself the limitations of perception and the equanimity to live on this planet” (Becker, 1973, p.50). Becker is talking about the development of our character here. Our character, according to Becker, is actually a form of necessary repression, a “normal self-protection and creative self-restriction” that makes it possible for us to bear life (1973, p.50). From this perspective it almost seems misleading to say that character *develops* because all the behaviors and ways of being, that is-all the possibilities-were there all along. When Becker says the development of our character is really the act of self-restriction what he seems to be arguing is that our *character* is actually more determined by what we do *not* do than by what we do. In other words, the shape of our character is determined by the restrictions imposed and according to Becker, these restrictions are self-imposed.

Becker’s explanation for the way character develops is essentially psychoanalytic in that the child accomplishes the development of character defenses in relation to the powerful parents. However, the impetus for this development is in many ways

independent of the parents and instead based on the child's own terror of existence, "his [the child's] attitudes came to him from his need to adapt to the whole desperate human condition, not merely to attune himself to the whims of his parents" (Becker, 1973, p.61). The development of our character is essentially the process of socialization, which Becker actually refers to as a sort of "instinctivization" of the human animal (1962, p. 86). What Becker means by "instinctivization" is that in a certain sense, socialization (which is another way for referring to the development of human character) represents a *hardening* of behavior that is found in the lower animals in the form of instincts (Becker, 1962, 1973). Instincts are what allow lower animals to act automatically and unthinkingly. Humans do not have instincts (at least not in the same way that other animals do); instead, thanks to self-consciousness, humans have personalities or characters. Still, this hardening of behavior, this *character*, is not who the child *really* is but is instead a vital lie, "a necessary and basic dishonesty about oneself and one's whole situation" (1973, p.55).

The human child seeks to avoid despair and it does this by falsifying and obscuring the truth of the human condition (Becker, 1973). This is accomplished through the building of defenses that allow the child to feel a basic sense of self-worth, meaningfulness, and power.

They [defenses] allow him to feel that he *controls* his life and his death...that he has a unique and self-fashioned identity, that he *is somebody*-not just a trembling accident germinated on a hothouse planet...(Becker, 1973, p.55)

These *defenses* are *character defenses* and they are what comprise the child's "identity" or character. But they are a falsification, a sort of *self-imposed* obliviousness. Life in the raw is really too much and the child has to avoid "too much thought, too much perception, too much *life*" (Becker, 1973, p. 53).

As described in the previous section, through the act of transference, the child banishes its sense of awe and fear of the universe to the delegated power of the parents in order to be able to find terror all in one manageable place as opposed to diffused throughout a chaotic universe, "The child denies the reality of his world as miracle and as terror" (Becker, 1973, p. 261). The child instills the parents with illusory power, then out of sheer terror searches for ways to gain or maintain the approval and attention of the parents in order to gain security and a basic sense of self-worth, "the whole of early experience is an attempt by the child to deny the anxiety of his emergence, his fear of losing his support, of standing alone, helpless and afraid" (Becker, 1973, p. 54). The loss of this support would equal annihilation both symbolically and literally. The child learns to control certain behaviors in favor of others in order to maintain a sense of safety. Laughing might gain a favorable response from the parents while screaming causes them to withdraw.

This sense of safety comes in the form of attention from the powerful parents and what this sense of safety translates to symbolically is a basic sense of self-worth, a feeling that one matters in this world (Becker, 1962, 1973). One has to matter, mere physical safety for the human organism is not sufficient. This is what Becker means when he writes that humans need to feel themselves "an object of primary value" (1962, p 76).

Becker is talking about the need for self-esteem and the child will go about getting it in any way that he or she can.

The way the child learns to go about acquiring self-esteem in relation to the parents, that is, the way the child consistently restricts him or herself in order to maintain safety both physically and symbolically (self-esteem), becomes his or her character. This is what Becker means when he writes "The child's character, his style of life, is his way of using the power of others, the support of the things and the ideas of his culture, to banish from his awareness the actual fact of his natural impotence" (Becker, 1973, p.55). Character is a lie because it represents our efforts to "banish" the awareness of our own "natural impotence". The reality is that we remain powerless in the face of an indifferent universe. Character is a lie because it represents our efforts to gain a sense that we matter in an indifferent universe, to gain a sense of self-esteem.

Self-esteem is vital to the human animal and it is crucial to Becker's conception of character. Without self-esteem, Becker says, the individual gives up, "...when people do not have self-esteem, they cannot act, they break down" (1962, p. 75). Becker explains that the urge to self-glorification is present in everyone and that it would be wrong to belittle this urge as mere vanity or gratuitous self-display (Becker, 1973). What this urge really represents is an honest desire to matter, and as we have seen, it begins in childhood, arising out of the fear of annihilation. Self-esteem is simply the need to be recognized as "*an object of primary value* in the universe" (Becker, 1962, p. 76). Becker also refers to this as the need to be *heroic*. Our main task in life is to be a "heroic contributor to world-life" (Becker, 1962, p. 76).

The result of the evolution of self-consciousness in the human animal is that the general animal instinct toward self-preservation evolved into the “need for heroic self-identity” (self-esteem) and it is this need to be heroic, the need for self-esteem, that drives the development of our character (Becker, 1962, p. 77). This is an oversimplification of Becker’s explanation of the evolution of the human animal’s need for self-esteem but it is sufficient for use in this thesis. The most important point is that humans must have a way to feel heroic. This need not be the grand heroism of a Winston Churchill or a Gandhi, as Becker points out (1973). One can gain a sense of heroism as a carpenter by providing for one’s family. Whatever it is, Becker’s main message is that in order for a person to live with any modicum of comfort, that person must feel that he or she matters. “This is the uniquely human need, what man everywhere is really all about- each person’s need to be an object of primary value, a heroic contributor...” (Becker, 1962, p.77). The question every human must answer is: How do I go about becoming a hero?

Becker’s conception of character can be somewhat difficult to grasp because it is so abstract. But I think that is exactly the point. For Becker, there is no such thing as character in the real and concrete sense. It *is* an abstraction; an illusion that “man, the animal that was not programmed by instincts to close off perception and assure automatic equanimity and forceful action” uses in order to *create* the illusion of equanimity and the possibility for forceful action (Becker, 1973, p.50). What Becker seems to be arguing is that character allows us to say, *I am this kind of person and therefore I will take this sort of action*. Keeping in line with Becker’s conception of character as self-restriction, it might actually be *more* accurate to say that character allows us to avoid the question: *What kind of person am I and what action should I take?* Either way, character is a lie, “a

necessary and basic dishonesty about one's self and one's whole situation" (Becker, 1973, p.55).

Becker occasionally refers to our character as "armor" (1973, p.56). He is drawing on Otto Rank's conception of "character armor". This is not a literal description but instead a metaphorical attempt to describe both the pros and cons of character. If we think about armor, its purpose is to protect us from the outside world by enveloping us in a protective layer. In the sense that character protects us (shields us) from the terror of self-consciousness and gives us something to cling to in the universe, character can be seen to function symbolically as armor.

The downside to armor is of course that it is restrictive; it limits our movements and prevents us from doing certain things that we might otherwise want to do. We come to view our character armor as if it is actually us; as if we really are a certain sort of person. This is the lie. Character is a screen we erect between ourselves and reality and then we engage in battle with that screen instead of with reality (Becker, 1973). We struggle within the prison of our armor, battling personal demons that are not indicative of reality but instead representative of the pieces we used to construct our armor. This can be seen in our painful interactions with others,

We enter symbiotic relationships in order to get the security
we need...relief from aloneness and helplessness; but these
relationships also bind us, they enslave us further because
they support the lie we have fashioned. (p.56)

Then we strain against these relationships. We struggle for our freedom within our armor instead of with reality. We struggle with the screen that we set against reality not reality

itself. This, Becker explains, results in a second hand quality of our struggle. "It is fateful and ironic how the lie we need in order to live dooms us to a life that is never really ours" (Becker, 1973, p. 56). But the alternative is to come face to face with despair.

To wear armor is to make a compromise; the warrior gives up a certain amount of freedom in order to gain protection. It is the same with our character; we give up a certain amount of freedom to act, in order to gain a sense of symbolic safety. This is what Becker means when he writes,

...in order to have a truly human experience there must be limits; and what we call culture or the superego sets such limits. Culture is a compromise with life that makes human life possible. (Becker, 1973, p. 265)

This quote moves away from a conversation strictly involving character and into one that includes culture. This should not be too surprising. Even as an infant, the child does not develop its character exclusively in relation to the parents because the parents themselves are enmeshed in a culture. It is probably more accurate to say that the child develops in relation to its parents' relation to society. Culture is a natural outgrowth of human character (Becker, 1973). Character and culture set the prescriptions for how to be in the world, what to do with oneself. The problem of "how to be a man" is one that is loaded with ambiguity and impossible to solve (Becker, 1973, p. 259). Character is a neurotic shield that hides the full ambiguity of life from oneself (Becker, 1973). We adhere to the grand illusion of character, and as will become clearer, of culture as well. Both represent a narrowing down of possibility and repression of experience.

Even though Becker describes character as a neurotic defense and a lie, he is not necessarily suggesting that people should do otherwise.

If character is a neurotic defense against despair and you shed that defense, you admit the full flood of despair, the full realization of the true human condition, what men are really afraid of, what they struggle against, and are driven toward and away from. (Becker, 1973, p.57)

When Becker explains character as a lie he is merely acknowledging the painful reality of the human condition and attempting to examine what he believes is *really going on* with humans. The question for Becker is not: Does one live in illusion or not?- but instead: On what level of illusion does one exist? (Becker, 1973). For Becker, the human child must deny and repress to avoid despair and the human adult must continue this repression.

While the character of the child develops largely in relation to the parents, the character of the adult comes to exist *more* largely in relation to the culture in which the adult exists. In what Becker refers to as the “ultimate transference”, the power to find meaning in the universe is transferred from the parents to the society or culture in which one exists.

The Illusion of Culture

In the previous sub-sections of this “in depth review” on Becker, we explored: *the paradoxical human condition, the fear of death, the fear of life and freedom, and character development in the individual*. Now that we have this foundation, it is time to move into Becker’s theory of culture. According to Becker (1973), character absorbs the fear of existence for humans and culture is a natural outgrowth of character. Culture is a massive collective system of death denial, a means of conquering death through symbolic

transcendence, "...man's innate and all-encompassing fear of death drives him to attempt to transcend death through culturally standardized hero systems and symbols" (Becker, 1974, p.xvii). As we have seen, although Becker often emphasizes death as *the* major motivator, it is actually self-consciousness as a whole that creates dread in humans. Thus it is really self-consciousness that culture conquers, "The natural mystery of birth, growth, consciousness, and death is taken over by society" (Becker, 1974, p.115). Society or culture accomplishes this in much the same way as character, albeit on a larger scale. Culture provides adult humans with a societal framework and roles that create the illusion of structure in a chaotic universe just as the parents allow for the illusion of structure and safety for the infant. The *power* and the *terror* that the child initially banishes in the parents as we saw in the previous section on character, eventually gets *transferred* to society. The structure of society and societal roles provides humans with a manageable (narrowed down) amount of choice and a basis for making choice in the world. Culture allows us to find a means of achieving personal heroism (meaning) in the universe as well as providing something for us to focus on besides the inevitability of death and our own "natural impotence" in the world (Becker, 1973). In other words, culture narrows down our freedom to manageable levels, maps out meaningful modes for life, and diverts our attention away from the reality of death. These of course, are the three basic problems of self-consciousness: fear of freedom, fear of life, and fear of death. Becker's theory about the way that culture conquers these problems can be broken down into three separate but interconnected areas: (1)Status and Role, (2)Meaningful Action, and (3)Diversion.

Status and Role

The concepts of status and role are an important part of culture. Everyone in a society has status and a role (Becker, 1962). This is based on many things and one of the first ways status and role are assigned depends on one's body. The gender of a child immediately places that child into a certain classification of status and role within society (Becker, 1962). Becker (1962, 1973) explains the historically sexist Freudian concept of "penis envy" in women, as being a *symbolically* accurate description of the opportunities denied to women in society,

"penis envy" is not the chagrin of a female that she was not born a 'superior' male member of the species and thus suffers a 'natural' inferiority. It is, rather, the result of some body comparison to see what an appendage entitles one to be: it is direct evidence about the possibility of primary heroism in an artificial cultural system. (Becker, 1962, p.80)

What Becker is explaining here is that cultural roles and the cultural belief system itself that these roles arise from, are "artificial"...which is to say that they are not real. The second-class citizenship that females and ethnic minorities, have historically experienced and continue to experience in society is not the result of "natural inferiority". Instead it is the result of *artificial* and *arbitrary* culture belief systems that have been taken at face value to be true and accurate reflections of the importance of one person or group over the other. A major purpose of status and role is to assign importance in the world. Becker explains that,

The minority groups of present-day industrial society who shout for freedom and human dignity are really clumsily asking that they be given a sense of primary heroism of which they have been cheated historically. (Becker, 1973, p.5)

All societies arrange their members in categories, infant, boy, girl, man, woman, old man, old woman (Becker, 1962). In some societies an old man is afforded the status of a respected elder and in others he is put out into the bushes to be eaten by hyenas (Becker, 1962). What makes someone or something important in a culture depends on what the people in that culture *decide* to make important. It is *not* because that something is *necessarily* important. It is easy to see how status and role can be incredibly destructive because they often result in the oppression of certain groups by other more powerful groups. What seems to be less easy to see, is *why* status and role exist in the first place and *why* oppression seems to happen in all societies.

Becker (1974) explains that status and role are the most basic prescriptions for action. As we have seen, it is very important for humans to have prescriptions for action as a means of avoiding the terror of full freedom. Status and role are essential to understanding human behavior because they inform us what to do in a given social situation and how to feel about ourselves while we do it (Becker, 1962). Status and role also make the behavior of others predictable allowing us to have some sense of what to expect from them. (Becker, 1962).

But people are unpredictable, and this can be dangerous. One can never be sure what the next person will be like, says Becker. Stereotyping, which is simply the

assigning of others to roles based on certain cues, “allows one to frame an adequate response based on reasonable inference” (Becker, 1962, p. 85). Of course, due to the fact that one is dealing with “massively unpredictable human objects”, dependable cues for inference are not always available (Becker, 1962, p.85). Nevertheless we stereotype, and Becker as usual, explains that we do this out of fear and a desire to buffer this fear.

When we know the other person’s role, we can proceed to the familiar “role-taking.” That is, we place ourselves in his shoes, knowing what his behavior is going to be, and thereby permit ourselves to formulate an appropriate response in advance. (Becker, 1962, p.85)

The prescriptions for behavior provided by roles and the status cues (genitals, skin color, age, clothing, etc.) that alert us to another individual’s position in society take care of both self-esteem and physical safety. We use other people as a yardstick against which to measure our value. We know where we stand in comparison to him or her, and we know what to expect from this individual. Thus, what Becker seems to be arguing is that personality and culture allow us to not only narrow down our own world in terms of who we are specifically, they also allow us to narrow down who others can be to us. However, the ability of personality and culture to do this with any degree of accuracy decreases dramatically with those who are culturally different and unfamiliar from us.

Meaningful Action, the Need to Feel Heroic

In addition to the safety of predictability, culture provides for a sense of meaning in one’s life. In order to find self-esteem, to feel heroic, the individual needs some sort of place or system in which to act heroically. “Culture is a structure of rules, customs, and

ideas, which serve as a vehicle for heroism” (Becker, 1962, p.78). Becker explains that the task of the ego is to find a way to navigate in the world without anxiety (1962). This is achieved by “learning to choose actions that are satisfying and bring praise instead of blame” (Becker, 1963, p.78). In other words, the more valued we feel, the less anxiety we feel. At first the child accomplishes this in relation to the parents, but at a certain point the child’s world becomes larger and the parents alone are no longer capable of containing the illusion of power. The child has to find something bigger, a more believable illusion to provide the prescriptions for meaningful action. “Culture provides just those rules and customs, goals of conduct, that place right actions automatically at the individual’s disposal” (Becker, 1962, 79). We do not have to worry too much if what we are doing is right and meaningful because culture answers this question for most of us. In this way, culture functions to make continued self-esteem possible, to “provide the individual with the conviction that *he is an object of primary value in a world of meaningful action*” (Becker, 1962, p.79).

As is becoming clear, “once an animal becomes self conscious, straightforward action is no longer possible” (Becker, 1962, p.79). Becker explains that in order to find meaning and to act in a way that is free of anxiety, one has to find a way to choose the “right” thing to do.

...as soon as one course of action becomes “right” and another “wrong”, life becomes moral and meaningful. Morality is merely a prescription for choice; and “meaning” is born as the choice is carried into action. (Becker, 1962, p. 79)

The issue of how to act, what is right and what is wrong, is a major dilemma for humans and culture helps solve this dilemma. Becker uses the analogy of a high-school play to talk about culture and meaningful action. He gets this no doubt from William James whom Becker quotes, "...mankind's common instinct for reality...has always held the world to be essentially a theatre for heroism" (as cited in Becker, 1962, p.75; 1973, p.1). Our identity is inseparable from our assigned roles Becker explains (1962). The most convincing way to define ourselves is to find out who we are in relation to others (status and role). Children derive their identities from their social environments which remain to their death "the only source for validating that identity" (Becker 1962, p.82). Other people -that is culture- are essential for humans when it comes to defining who they are. Becker says essentially the same thing albeit in more morbid terms later in his work when he writes that humans are unable to justify their existence to themselves (1973).

For Becker, the nature of society is a drama or a play in which everyone is a performer, that is, everyone has a role. Our "entire life is a training, preparation, and practice of a succession of parts in the plots" (Becker, 1962, p.82). We derive our feeling of heroism from our ability to show our worthiness at fulfilling these roles. Some roles are more desirable than others. Our identities are reflected in each role and designation that we fill, and we carry with that reflection a sense of personal value befitting that particular role or designation. "When others recognize that claim [of value], as the culture provides that they do, meaningful motivation and value become an inseparable part of daily action" (Becker, 1962, p.83). Becker is explaining that we need other people to

recognize the value of *our* role in order to gain our sense of meaningfulness and a feeling that what we are doing actually matters.

One buys into a particular role with the assumption that it is naturally important because society seems to agree. Becker (1973) explains that individuals who are able to engage in the duties of their role without questioning: "Does this really matter?"-seem to gain the most protection (against terror) from their role. But as Yalom (1980) explains, most self-reflective people tend to question their roles and the meaning of things from time to time. These periods of questioning are generally difficult times for people. In fact, in his explanation of psychopathology such as depression, Becker takes the view that the individual is actually suffering from a *realistic* view of his or her situation and an inability to buy into the illusory roles for achieving personal heroism provided by society (Becker, 1973).

One thing that helps keep individuals from questioning the veridicality of their roles is to complicate things so much that one becomes completely entwined within that role. "Culture provides man with a highly involuted and meaningful schema of action, which makes fine shades of self-esteem possible" (Becker, 1962, p.83). This is also what Becker is saying when he writes that we drive ourselves into a blind sort of obliviousness, becoming preoccupied with social games and psychological tricks (1973). It is what Yalom (1980) is referring to in the quote presented earlier in the section on freedom, when he writes about the way we absorb ourselves in the familiar world of the everyday. There is only so much mental energy to devote to any given task and if one is absorbed and engaged in a complicated role, one has no time to contemplate existence and no time

for terror. This explains in part the complexity of various rituals utilized by various societies throughout history (Becker, 1974).

But people need to believe in what they are doing in order to expend the effort; they need to feel that they have purpose. This need to have some sort of purpose, regardless of what exactly that purpose is, is what Becker refers to as our urge to heroism (1973). Returning to Becker's play analogy, the script of a play provides the framework for purpose and the prescriptions for action for the actors. Culture provides this framework for people in *real life* in the form of the "social hero-system". "The social hero-system into which we are born marks out paths for our heroism, paths to which we conform, to which we shape ourselves so that we can please others, become what they expect us to be" (Becker, 1973, p.82). When we feel that others are pleased with us, we feel that we matter to them and that we matter in the world. The script of a play designates the roles that actors play in the production and how they interact on the stage. The physical, material stage is analogous to the physical, material world in that they both actually physically exist. The humanly constructed script is analogous to humanly constructed culture because both tell people what to do on the stage or in the world. Culture and script are both symbolic human constructions that do not exist independently in reality.

The script tells each actor in the play where to stand, what to say, and what to do. Without a script, the actors of a play would roam aimlessly about the stage each doing his/her own thing, existing in a world of limitless possibilities (freedom) with no sense of who they are or what they are supposed to do. Of course, there is much room for creativity and spontaneous improvisation in a play without a script. But individuals

possess varying levels of creative talent and the ability to deal with such ambiguity. Becker (1973) explains that it takes tremendous courage to be creative with one's life because it amounts to stepping out onto a limb that has not been tested and there is no way of knowing whether or not that limb will collapse beneath us.

Creative expression is a blatant and courageous attempt at self-justification in the universe because it does not use what is already there provided by one's culture (Becker, 1973). Everyone is creative, but few have the courage and the talent to be truly and completely creative with their lives. Complete creativity is rewarding for those who have talent but it is exhausting and demoralizing for those who do not. According to Becker, the difference between the artist and the neurotic is talent. For a penetrating analysis on creativity, I refer the reader to Rank's (1968) text, *Art and Artist*.

Becker's main point is that most people want to know what they are doing here and what they are supposed to be doing. The script provides an answer to this question for the actors and culture provides an answer for the rest of us. Society has always been,

...a symbolic action system, a structure of statuses and roles, customs and rules for behavior, designed to serve as a vehicle for earthly heroism. Each script is somewhat unique, each culture has a different hero system. (Becker, 1973, p. 5)

Becker believes that the inescapable and overwhelming question of how to live life is unbearable until answered with a least some degree of certainty. The sheer magnitude of possible ways to live a life (freedom) makes it nearly impossible to answer this question completely on one's own. We can now revisit and better understand what

Yalom was saying earlier in our discussion of freedom, how culture represents the giving up of our freedom in the pursuit of a sense of safety:

We are surrounded, “at home in”, a stable world of familiar objects and institutions, a world in which all objects and beings are connected and interconnected many times over. We are lulled into a sense of cozy, familiar belongingness while the primordial world of vast emptiness and isolation is buried and silenced, only to speak in brief bursts during nightmares and mythic visions. (Yalom, 1980, p 358)

This “stable world of familiar objects and institutions” is culture. Culture provides us with some ground to stand on but it also hides the reality of our situation. It is what allows humans to narrow down what is actually a world of dizzying, unmanageable possibility.

Culture as Diversion

As described previously, societal roles serve to increase predictability and provide a structure for meaningful action to the individuals within a particular culture. There is yet another function to cultural roles. That function is to provide the individual with something else to focus on besides the terrifying reality of his or her situation. A constant, fully accurate and undefended perception of one’s actual situation in the universe would drive a person mad (Becker, 1973). Thus culture functions as a means of maintaining sanity via diversion. This *diversion* can be seen in extremis, for example, in the relentless training of a Lance Armstrong, countless hours at work so that one might own a Mercedes, sleepless nights and endless meetings in an effort to build a skyscraper,

or 18-hour days in residency so that one may become a doctor. These specific roles or diversions are not possible in every culture because not every culture provides for these specific roles. Nevertheless, every culture does provide roles, a place for one to fit into. In a different culture this diversion may be a desire to become a Shaman, to have many wives/husbands, or to raise the fattest hogs, etc. "What the anthropologists call 'cultural relativity' is thus really the relativity of hero-systems the world over" (Becker, 1973, p.5). Striving never really ends. There is always another mountain. Once one achieves the role of doctor, one may then begin striving to increase the size of one's practice, get a better office, etc.

For some people, their particular diversion seems to consume them more than others. Such passionate drivenness in humans harkens back to the quest for personal heroism and meaning. Becker uses the phrase "immortality projects" to refer to our efforts to create something that will live on after us and thus allow us to symbolically transcend death. For some, children accomplish this desire for immortality in the sense that one can live on through one's children. For others this is not enough. A skyscraper is a monument to the developer who erected it, a testament that he existed. Leonardo Da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" is a testament to his existence. Psychoanalysis was Freud's immortality project and his vehicle for symbolic death transcendence (Becker, 1973). The mythical hero Achilles actually preferred symbolic immortality to literal immortality. He participated in the war between Greece and Troy even though he knew it would result in his own death. He decided that it was better to be remembered by many and thus live on symbolically as a great hero than to live physically as a common man or even a common hero. Immortality projects need not be as grand as Freud's psychoanalysis or the legend

of an Achilles. People vary in the degree of their drivenness, nevertheless Becker explains, everyone desires to live on in someway.

But the achievement of symbolic immortality is only one piece of our drivenness when it comes to our diversions. Our own assumption or belief in the value of our roles within our cultural-action system allows us to focus our attention on something (our role) besides the painful reality of our situation in much the same way a broken-hearted lover distracts him or herself from the pain of loss by cleaning the garage. This is what Becker means when he writes that “We drive ourselves into a blind sort of obliviousness...” with our “...various personal preoccupations...” (p. 27). Diversion is accomplished as the individual actively strives to fulfill the obligations of a particular cultural role. Through culture, Becker explains,

...man cuts out for himself a manageable world: he throws himself into action uncritically, unthinkingly. He accepts the cultural programming that turns his nose where he is supposed to look...He doesn't have to have fears when his feet are solidly mired and his life mapped out in a ready-made maze. (Becker, 1973, p 23)

This is a fascinating quote and it contains Becker's entire thesis. By “maze” Becker is referring to culture and by “ready-made” he is stating that culture is fabricated and already there waiting for us when we enter the world. Culture quells our fears of death and groundlessness by providing some much needed limits in the form of “cultural programming” that “turns our noses” where they are “supposed to look”. It provides something on which to focus our attention. Of course, culture is also a prison because it

takes away our freedom and limits who we can be (as women and minorities have been most painfully aware); our “feet are solidly mired” and our lives already “mapped out”. This is the price we pay for a reduction of dread, and most gladly pay it.

Culture is an “anxiety-buffer” that is ingeniously designed to take away our freedom, to restrict choice while providing the illusion of choice (Becker, 1973). This is what Yalom means when he says that we constitute our world and then conceal the fact that we are the ones who constitute it (1980). We can see this better by further considering the implications of Becker’s labyrinth analogy. If we actually imagine ourselves attempting to navigate our way through a labyrinth we seem to be presented with a number of choices regarding which way we might go. Should I turn left or should I turn right? It is up to me or at least it seems that way. In one sense, I am *free* to choose which way I want to go. However, what I may fail to recognize is that the labyrinth itself, the very walls that constitute it, provide the choice. The labyrinth itself provides the opportunity -the necessity- to make a decision while at the same time limiting the number of possible decisions I might make (left or right). In this way, the “ready-made maze” of society “turns my nose” in the direction it should go without seeming to do so. After all, if the labyrinth were not there, I could go in any direction. I am reminded of the way parents get a child to take his or her medicine by asking “Do you want to take it with a spoon or a little cup?” In either case, the child is going to take the medicine.

Here’s another interesting point regarding Becker’s labyrinth analogy. The labyrinth also provides me with a goal, that goal being to find my way to the center of the labyrinth. In other words it tells me how to be a hero (Heroes find their way to the center). This gives me purpose by providing me with the prescription for meaningful

action. Thus, every time I am faced with a choice (left or right), I make my decision based on my goal of getting to the center of the labyrinth. There is a “right” choice and a “wrong” choice which as we saw earlier becomes very important in allowing us to take forceful action. Put simply, because the labyrinth is there and provides me with two options, I choose one; and because I am trying to get to the center of the labyrinth, I make my choice based on my belief that my choice will lead me to my goal (the center). Culture provides for choice in a similar way: Do I buy red Nikes or blue Nikes? Do I go to this school or that school? Do I marry this one or that one?

But what if the labyrinth were not there? Suddenly I find myself faced not only with an infinite number of possible choices (freedom) as to which way I will turn and proceed, I also seem to have lost my reason for even making a decision (meaninglessness). It is important to reemphasize that we are not talking about decisions based on basic survival as in “Do I kill this animal for food or do I starve?” We are talking about the symbolic sense of personal value in the universe that humans must have to make life bearable. Without the labyrinth of culture, questions of symbolic meaning become totally ambiguous. Whereas before, my purpose was to get to the center of the labyrinth; now I have no purpose. There is no labyrinth to get to the center of. There is not even a center. There is just here and there. I can stand here, but I can stand over there just as easily. But why should I stand over there as opposed to here? Why is that spot any better than this one? What do I base my decision on and what would that decision be in the service of anyway? If we really think about this situation, it is quite unsettling. We are faced with nothingness, pure open space. The questions of what color Nikes to buy, what school to attend, or what person to marry become instead: Why buy Nikes at all? Why go

to school at all? Why get married at all? Actually, without a culture to provide these cultural options, these questions completely disappear. It seems to me that the next logical question becomes: What am I doing here anyways? And without the distraction of decisions provided by the cultural labyrinth to take up our mental energy, it becomes impossible to ignore that question. We float alone and unanswered in vast empty space, our words falling off into nothingness: "What am I doing here...?"

This is exactly the question that character and culture allow us to avoid by answering it for us. Becker's conclusion is that *all* cultures are mythical hero-systems in which people "serve to gain a sense of primary value, of cosmic specialness" (Becker, 1973, p.5) It does not matter if a culture is magical-religious and primitive or if it is secular-scientific and civilized. The function is the same and that function is to help humans bear the burden of self-consciousness that we have been discussing-of being, as Becker (1973) puts it, an animal that is completely open to total experience.

Empirical Issues: Terror Management Theory

One of the criticisms of Becker's work has been that it is purely theoretical. However, over the last twenty years, empirical support for Becker's ideas has emerged in the form of Terror Management Theory (TMT) (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991). The foundation of TMT is based on Becker's theory that human behavior is oriented toward the pursuit of a worldview and self-esteem as a means of gaining protection from anxiety. This anxiety occurs as a result of the awareness of the inevitability of death (Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg, 1999). According to TMT theorists, one's cultural worldview and self-esteem combine to create a "dual-component cultural anxiety buffer" for humans. Following Becker, these researchers posit that a

cultural worldview is a humanly constructed and symbolic conception that provides one's life with order and standards through which to obtain feelings of personal value and the hope of transcending death. Self-esteem is achieved when the individual believes that he or she is living up to those standards of value prescribed by his or her cultural worldview.

The two components the cultural anxiety buffer (worldview and self-esteem) are arbitrary and fragile social constructions that require constant consensual validation in order to function effectively as an anxiety buffer (Pyszczynski et al, 1999). Much of human behavior is motivated towards achieving validation of one's cultural worldview and warding off threats to one's faith in that worldview. According to Becker (1973), people with different worldviews are threatening precisely because they do the exact opposite of validating our worldviews and instead serve as a contradictory example. In other words, different worldviews threaten the psychological structures that we have erected to protect us against the anxiety created by an awareness of death.

In order to test the above mentioned assertion, these TMT theorists have developed what they refer to as the mortality salience hypothesis:

The mortality salience (MS) hypothesis states that to the extent that a psychological structure provides protection against anxiety, then reminding people of the source of their anxiety should lead to an increased need for that structure and thus more positive reactions to things that support it and more negative reactions to things that threaten it. (Pyszczynski et al, 1999, p. 36)

Researchers have operationally defined mortality salience in different ways such as open ended questions about participants' death, asking participants to write essays about their own deaths, fear of death scales, proximity to a funeral home, and gory accident footage (Pyszczynski, 1999).

Considerable evidence has been found to support the hypothesis that reminding people of their mortality increases their need to have faith in their own worldviews and causes them to react more favorably to people who validate those views while reacting more negatively to people and ideas who threaten those views. All of this occurs at an unconscious level. For instance, Rosenblatt et al, (1989) found that municipal court judges who were reminded about their own mortality (MS condition) awarded significantly more severe punishment to a person accused of prostitution. The researchers concluded that the MS condition increased people's need for the protection provided by their cultural worldview and increased self-esteem striving in the form of attempts to live up to cultural standards that provide one a sense of self-worth. The researchers refer to this phenomenon as "worldview defense". In the previously mentioned study, "worldview defense" was exhibited by a greater need to cling to mainstream cultural views regarding the immorality of prostitution causing these judges to react more negatively to individuals who exemplified a direct contradiction of this view (accused prostitutes).

More than 200 other studies on TMT have been conducted and the results support the hypothesis that reminding people of their own mortality leads to an increased defense of their worldviews across religious, nationalistic, political, ethnic, and gender domains (Arndt, Routledge, Cox, Goldenberg, 2005). For instance, Greenberg, et al. (1990) found

that mortality salience increased prejudice. Another study found that mortality salience increased aggression toward someone who disagreed with one's worldview (McGregor et al, 1998). Pyszczynski et al, (1996) obtained results that exposing participants to thoughts of their own death lead to heightened conformity to cultural standards. Additional research has demonstrated that these effects are specific to thoughts of one's own death. For instance, similar effects were not produced by other unpleasant or aversive thoughts such as intense physical pain or worries about life after college (Arndt et al, 2005).

The results of TMT research provide strong support for Becker's assertion that human awareness of personal mortality plays a major role in the creation of worldviews and culture. The study involving municipal court judges stands out in terms of the potential for psychologists to intervene at the systemic level. This particular study demonstrates the way that people in power might unconsciously react more negatively toward individuals who have different values. This research not only identifies that bias occurs in the criminal justice system but also offers an in-depth psychological explanation for why. In other words, TMT offers a potential explanation for the etiology of prejudice and bias (ethnocentric monoculturalism).

Discussion

In this thesis I have presented current ideas in psychology on the definitions of culture and cultural worldviews. I have also presented current explanations for cultural encapsulation, referred to as ethnocentric monoculturalism. I proposed that current models of cultural competence such as Sue's (2001) MDCC provide a valuable framework for psychologists but nevertheless leave something to be desired. The piece that has been missing from cultural competence models, in my opinion, is a dynamic explanation for the existence of culture in the first place. Models such as Sue's have

rightly emphasized the importance of recognizing different views of reality and the fact that multiple systems (racial, familial, communal, and national) influence these views. In addition to recognizing that different views exist, Sue has also emphasized the need to develop racially-focused, culture-specific approaches based on an understanding of the specific views that exist within a given person's culture.

Despite all of this, the question still remains: Why are these views so important? Why is it that all peoples develop a certain way of viewing the world, and then find it so difficult to accept a different group's view? To simply state that alternative worldviews are difficult to accept and frightening because they are unfamiliar, seems to be a hopeless oversimplification. It seems to me, that in order to move toward the goal of cultural competence, it is necessary to first understand not only that differences exist, but why those differences exist and why they can be so problematic. Put simply, in order to develop a respect and understanding of different cultures, psychologists must first develop an understanding of the phenomenon of culture as a whole.

The work of Ernest Becker represents an untapped resource for developing a psychological conception of the dynamic origins and functions of culture. It is possible that this understanding may be directly applicable towards psychological conceptions of different cultures. However, I believe that the strongest benefit will be found in the power of Becker's work to assist the Euro-American psychologist in developing a more conscious understanding of his or her own culture. Becker dispels the illusion of culture while at the same time explaining its vital importance to all humans. The questions that Becker raises lead to a curiosity within the reader about why he or she believes the things he or she believes, and how those beliefs developed in the first place. Such questioning

has the potential to open the door for the reader to new possibilities for viewing the world by making what was once invisible, visible. Ultimately, this expansion of vision in the Euro-American psychologist has implications for the recognition and responsible use of power and privilege.

The responsible use of power and privilege is described in Sue's MDCC model (2001). Broadly speaking, Sue seems to divide multicultural psychology into two areas. The first area offers new ideas about a familiar goal, namely the pursuit in psychology to achieve more effective, race-based, culturally-specific methods for treating diverse clients. The second area calls for a radically different approach to multicultural psychology that involves a redefining of psychology as a discipline. Although potentially applicable to both areas, Becker's work seems most relevant to the second area (redefinition of psychology) because such a redefinition requires that Euro-American psychologists examine themselves and their own beliefs about their roles as agents of change in their client's lives. Such self-examination is inherently difficult for psychologists because it involves the questioning of their own worldviews.

Sue bases his call for a new definition of psychology on his conclusion that multicultural psychology is really about social justice and his subsequent definition of cultural competence as "the ability to engage in actions or create conditions that maximize the optimal development of client and client systems" (2001, p.802). With this assertion, Sue does create interesting questions regarding the definition of psychology and the roles that psychologists should fill. He proposes broadening the purview of the clinical psychologist beyond a focus on the individual and suggests placing the psychologist into the role of an advocate for social justice who intervenes in professional,

organizational, and societal systems on behalf of cultural minorities. This sentiment has also been echoed by the APA (2003).

Sue's argument for extending the role of the psychologist into the realm of institutional change agent arises no doubt from research indicating that oppression, discrimination and the resulting poverty, are major contributing and exacerbating factors to mental distress in minorities (DHHS, 2001; Sue, 2001). Presumably the rationale is that if a major cause of mental distress is simply being a member of a marginalized group, then eliminating a group's status as marginalized should decrease the level of distress felt by members of that group. Another way of looking at this might be to say that the etiology of psychopathology in marginalized minority clients lies not just within the client but within societal structures. Therefore, one might argue that in order to treat the client, the psychologist must *treat* society. Psychologists who take this perspective and seek to intervene on the behalf of marginalized groups at a professional, organizational, and societal level are serving as agents of change in a new way that seems to have been previously considered outside the realm of clinical psychology (possibly with the exception of feminist psychology theory).

In order to serve as an agent of change on this systemic level, psychologists must first agree that this is part of their role as a psychologist. Psychologists also need to understand how they themselves play a role in oppression (Sue, 2001). To this end it would seem that psychologists need to focus their efforts on their own culture. Specifically, they must devise new ways to educate other psychologists and members of the mainstream society about the invisibility of oppression (i.e., ethnocentric monoculturalism) as well as ways to *treat* it.

Thus, Euro-American psychologists need to conduct research on Euro-American psychologists and other members of mainstream society to better understand the origins, mechanisms, and functions of bias. This might involve taking the perspective that bias, racism and oppression are diagnosable, collective mental disorders that need to be treated. Ethnocentric monoculturalism seems in a certain sense, to be a cultural diagnosis for White Americans. This perspective is likely to meet with resistance in the field due to current definitions and views about what a mental disorder is. Clinical psychologists may find it strange to diagnose an entire society and to consider society as a client. Diagnoses of psychopathology tend to be based on deviations from normality and the negative effects that the individual sustains as a result of that deviation from normality. Thus, if an entire society is prejudiced, then prejudice would be normal and the prejudiced group itself would probably not suffer distress (only the victims of their prejudice would). However, one might make the argument that rejecting the idea of cultural diagnoses merely reflects the biased, individualistic, Euro-American psychology value system.

The idea of a cultural diagnosis of racism or prejudice may not be an appropriate solution but it is an interesting way to think about oppression. However, if such a perspective were taken, the *treatment* of bias and prejudice could then be pursued from a clinical standpoint. Such *treatment* would need to be based on research and guided by a theory of culture that addresses these issues of bias and worldviews. Becker's theory provides a creative way to do just that and Terror Management Theory offers a means of providing empirical support in this area.

Future research in TMT should focus on decision makers and other influential members of society in order to create more understanding and awareness regarding the

nature of unconscious bias. Additionally, research should also focus on clinical psychologists and graduate students in clinical psychology. Psychology will benefit from research conducted on its own members to further increase understanding of the etiology and manifestations of bias in psychology.

Conclusion

This thesis is on the edge between a clinical psychology thesis and a philosophy thesis. However, this makes sense if we take the view, as Sue (2001) does, that cultural competence is really about social justice. After all, social justice is about morality, and morality is a philosophical question. The writings of early psychologists such as William James and Sigmund Freud, although flawed in their own ways, demonstrate a deep appreciation for philosophy and the highly complex and abstract aspects of the human condition. In the pursuit of scientific credibility, psychology has moved further away from philosophy. This is unfortunate because the result has been a sort of hyper-specialization and restrictive narrowing of focus. It is this narrow focus that has lead multicultural psychologists such as Hall (1997) to comment on the growing obsolescence of psychology.

The implications of Becker's theory for multicultural psychology are found in the effect it has on the Euro-American psychologist who reads it and the questions it raises in him or her regarding personal cultural worldviews. Although Becker's theory on culture may help White psychologists understand different cultural viewpoints, it must be emphasized that his theory is a Euro-American conceptualization of Euro-American culture and worldviews. His work can be viewed as a deconstruction of Euro-American culture that functions to pull the reader out of his or her cultural embeddedness (i.e.,

ethnocentric monoculturalism). The way that Becker accomplishes this is through an undermining of the reader's unquestioning faith in his or her worldview. This undermining is accomplished as Becker explains the vital yet illusory nature of cultural worldviews and the origins and functions of culture as rooted in the terror of existence. One of Becker's goals in his writing was to increase awareness of the evil that groups of people do to others and the reasons behind this evil. He believed that a greater understanding of our own fearfulness might lead to an ability to transcend this fearfulness and the devastating effects that it has on ourselves and on others. This seems to be perfectly in line with the goals of cultural competence in clinical psychology.

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